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Positioning Poetry

A maverick framework for the curious and bold

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Cover image: Painting 453 by David Platts

Glossary

AAWP

Australasian Association of Writing Programs

AQA

Education charity providing school qualifications and support

ACE

Arts Council England

AWP

Association of Writers and Writing Programs (United States of America)

DfES, subsequently DfE

Department for Education (and Skills)

DIY

"do it yourself"

DNA

Deoxyribonucleic acid

GCSE

General Certificate of Secondary Education

HEA

Higher Education Academy

NATE

National Association for the Teaching of English

NAWE

National Association of Writers in Education

Ofqual

the regulator of qualifications, examinations and assessments in England

QAA

Quality and Assurance Agency

QCA

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

WMO

World Meteorological Organization

Summary

My focus here is on the mutually beneficial roles of poet and poetry entrepreneur. I explore how my personal development as a poet has interacted with other fields of practice (including science) and running a national writers' organization concerned particularly with education. I demonstrate why "fields of practice" are sometimes considered in too separate a manner, and how poetry can play a role in connecting them, translating from one domain to another.

Crucial to this is the way in which poetry informed my own education and emerging identity (as chronicled in Chapter 2). It has led to a subversive spirit that is nevertheless dedicated to the rigours of a demanding craft. In seeking to support new writers in their learning of that craft – and sharing it further themselves – I have held to the idea of writer as maverick, and the importance of any systems reflecting that principle; systems, perhaps, as mavericks in their own right.

I explore in detail public works that include a themed anthology (Chapter 3), a solo collection (Chapter 4), a subject benchmark statement and research reports (Chapter 5), but stress the broader range of writing that underpins the whole, including articles, reviews, editorial work and other literary projects. Chapter 6 interleaves all these areas of activity, revealing the creative tensions between them and suggesting how current initiatives – both personal and public – might be refocused.

I have chosen a particular poem to act as transition from one chapter to the next, a concept I explain (in Chapter 1) with reference to musical precedents. Music, indeed, features large, as it does in my own history. My title derives in part from a review of a Nigel Kennedy album of 2008¹, a recording of classical concertos that incorporates electrified cadenzas and a jazz finale, guaranteeing disapproval from certain quarters of the musical establishment, where boundaries are viewed as sacrosanct.

Kennedy is the subject of a current project, but curiosity itself is my bigger concern, related to those procedures that either nurture or threaten it. To sideline curiosity seems to me unthinkable, but I operate within a realm that is

¹ "[...] very bold, I'll certainly give Kennedy that. But it's too willful to warrant anything like a general recommendation, except to Kennedy fans and the curious." (Cowan 2008: 62)

itself often viewed as marginal. Poetry is rarely considered central or even relevant to public discourse but I assert here how and why it should be so, focusing on its power to enthuse and engage, to conceptualize and transmit through song. I see my role as a poetry activist: partly poet as *social* activist; partly activist of poetry itself.

1: The Poetry Channel

It is a familiar scenario: we are going round the table introducing ourselves, although – as leaders of national arts organizations – many of us know each other already.

I'm Paul Munden. I'm a poet.

Heads turn. Minds switch on. It was not planned; it just occurred to me as the right way to start. I had not expected it to be so surprising – or effective.

I'm also Director of NAWE, the National Association of Writers in Education.

As the meeting proceeds, I realize I have set down an important marker, one that characterizes not only me but the organization for which I work and the wider range of activity in which I am involved.

Passports no longer give details of professions but I have one from 1980 that does. I wonder what the authorities made of it, that small word: *poet*. It was surely a reckless choice for a new graduate, and has hardly been justified in terms of a traditional poetic output, but the fact that it has spanned over thirty years and (for me at least) holds good, suggests that something unusual has been risked, explored, achieved – and here documented in order to analyze how poetry can be a *driver* in how one tackles the world.

I set out on this study at a time when several projects were reaching fruition: the introduction of a Creative Writing A Level; a report on Creative Writing in higher education; a book of New and Selected Poems. Since then, other projects have emerged that complicate and enrich the process of understanding the connections between them all. Earlier this year, the Department for Education funded a new poetry memorization and recitation competition for students in Years 10–13. Initiated by Andrew Motion, "Poetry by Heart" chimed with Michael Gove's insistence that all students should be learning poetry in this way. It seemed at first counter to what NAWE champions – students exploring poetry by writing poems of their own – but we became involved in order to see how contemporary poets and teachers might work more effectively together, not just in supporting the competition but in finding new ways for poetry to enthuse and be better understood. I was engaged in multiple roles: organizing events,

selecting poets and helping them to devise their programmes; I led one session and consequently brought my own practice to bear on the project. All of this was done at minimal notice, with minimal funds. It typified for me the nature of the "poetry business" in which I have located myself and which, in small ways, I have helped to shape. Crucially, the project made me think afresh about poetry and its essential relationship to memory, this at a time when I was already embarked on a personal journey into the past, researching how poetry first gained a hold on me and has informed my working practices ever since.

Chapter 2 relates that journey in depth but I want to highlight a particular undertaking in 1997, a poetry project in a Dorset school, hardly convenient from my Yorkshire base, but I decided to make a virtue of the geographical challenge. After my two-day visit to the school, all subsequent work was conducted over the Internet. Email then was primarily a business tool, so to think of it alive with poems gave an almost subversive thrill. Working with every year-group, I wanted the project to have an over-arching theme, and hit upon an idea to fit with the digital means of production. "The Poetry Channel" was our imaginary new broadcasting station: its programmes had familiar titles but each was scripted using poetry alone. Thus the youngest children did weather forecasts, older children news reports; others covered sport, or worked on versions of "The Antiques Roadshow" or "Tomorrow's World". "The South Bank Show" combined poems with paintings from the Art department, while "Green Peter" gave the children's favourite an environmental twist.²

How to clear a stream

First of all, take away the crisp packet.
Then remove the rusting bike wheel
And the old boot which you threw away last year.
After that, remove the pollution pump
That those men installed last week.
Take away the broken mug, which you threw into there last summer.
Now,
Here's one God made earlier.

(Alex Ball, Year 7)

² For an article about the project by the lead teacher, see Beaton (1998: 10–11). A spoof of "Mastermind" that featured in the final "broadcast", with the author in the chair, is provided as Appendix A.

I see now how this project was also a crusade. Poetry could take on anything, could be the very fabric of enquiry, education and address, whatever the focus. It could challenge expectations, reinvigorate, and enthuse. The footballer's mazy run down the wing, followed by the short, incisive pass, was captured on the page, length of line and line-breaks interpreted in new ways as recalcitrant pupils – who might have preferred to be out there on the pitch – suddenly found what fun was to be had in this alternative world; fun – and genuine intellectual rewards.

Years later, I would see this evidenced within the writers-in-schools research undertaken by NAWE. When asked what they learnt when working with writers, students replied (amongst other positive comments) "How to think".³ Meanwhile, I found myself in situations where I needed to put my own theory to the test, writing poems for British Council publications on topics involving science and society (as explored in Chapter 3), or working with a photographer on *Asterisk* (Munden 2011), weaving an array of personal preoccupations into a book on Shandy Hall (Chapter 4).

I say "theory", but it was not a formulated approach, or one informed by academic study. I had encountered various theories as they began to appear in the NAWE magazine, *Writing in Education*, in the mid 1990s (when they received considerable resistance) and was familiar with the *rhizome* concept as described by Deleuze and Guattari (1988), notably through the work of Graeme Harper, whose essays on Creative Writing pedagogy made much of it,⁴ but I had not related such theory to my own writing or teaching. There was a different type of principle underpinning my efforts, one with a willful *naïvety* at its core. It is, ironically, a complex concept with a considerable history, Aristotle's own ambivalence setting the trend. As a proponent of scientific definition, he nevertheless admits that "definition is an account signifying the essence of the thing" (153a 15) and that:

the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good

³ See *Class Writing* (Owen and Munden 2010: 11).

⁴ I first encountered the rhizomatic metaphor when typesetting an article for the NAWE magazine (Harper 1987: 17-28). In a self-taught act of transdisciplinarity, I worked out how to draw on a computer and reproduced the rhizome in diagrammatic form.

metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars. (1449a: 5-8)⁵

Ken Robinson alludes to this in a statistical chart of how metaphorical thinking diminishes as we progress through education: "The Decline of Genius".⁶

| Age | Capability |
|-------|------------|
| 3-5 | 98% |
| 8-10 | 32% |
| 13-15 | 10% |
| 25+ | 2% |

To place value on naïvety is not to question the importance of knowledge but to define a particular type of knowledge acquisition that relies on an innocent receptiveness, a state of being attuned to the unexpected. By "knowledge acquisition" I am referring here to what is gained through making a poem, both a new understanding of the world and of how to make poetry. The complication, naturally, is that a baseline of knowledge is required for this to happen. Some significant dexterity with language is paramount, as are the skills to *re-tune*, and interpret. This last point correlates to the importance placed by much Creative Writing teaching on *re-writing*.

A further complication lies in the ongoing nature of the process: the acquisition of knowledge, or experience, must somehow preserve the innocence. This cyclical conundrum is one of my major themes, applying both to my own poetry, especially in embracing diverse subject knowledge, and to the ways in which Creative Writing teaching is supported.

Notions of innocence and experience immediately summon William Blake (to whom I refer for different reasons in Chapter 4). Introducing Blake's most famous work, Geoffrey Keynes (ed. 1967: xiv) writes:

The Innocence poems were the products of a mind in a state of innocence and of an imagination unspoiled by stains of worldliness. Public events and private emotions soon converted Innocence into Experience [...]

⁵ Translations of Aristotle are taken from Barnes (ed. 1984).

⁶ The chart was presented within Ken Robinson's keynote talk at the 'Confident Creativity' conference in Glasgow, March 2005, and included in 'Creative Writing in Schools' (Munden 2006).

Intriguingly, some poems from Innocence were transferred to Experience. There is no absolute artistic division between the two. Blake's "increasing awareness of the social injustices of his time" (ibid.) is another matter, relevant to my later discussion of how poetry is socially engaged.

Focusing for now on innocence, I want to stress how describing a state of unknowing is inevitably fraught.⁷ Paul Muldoon, in an interview for *The White Review* (undated), puts it well:

It is about being in the habit of ignorance. I love the descriptions – by some of the great poets – of this condition. Wordsworth calls it 'wise passiveness'; [...] There are many people who write poems who've not got their heads around this idea, and who actually think that they know what they're doing. I really believe that the minute one thinks one knows what one's doing – actually, in any department of life – one's probably making a terrible mistake. That's the most difficult thing to teach and the most difficult thing to learn.

He refers to Wordsworth but the more famous theorist on this is Keats, with his concept of "Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts".⁸ As Diana Barsham says, "Placing confidence in imaginative truth, writers can work effectively without intellectual certainty, without knowing in advance the solution to their creative problem." (2011: 60)

Keats uses other terms that have become central to poetry criticism, "watchful" being one.⁹ I play with this idea in the following poem.¹⁰

Chameleon

My emotions are a give-away -
green with envy, black with rage.

My wandering eyes look loopy

⁷ The pages of *Writing in Education* have never flared so far into heated debate as on this issue. See Nos. 39, 40 & 41. Richard Burns (2006: 20-23) perhaps exacerbated the matter by using the term *unthinking*.

⁸ See Keats' letter to his brothers, 22 December 1818 (Gittings ed. 1970: 43). The relevance of Keats' famous phrase to Creative Writing was explored in a NAWÉ presentation at AWP Washington 2011. The contributing papers were published in installments in *Writing in Education* (53, 55, 56).

⁹ In "Lamia" and "Ode on Indolence" (Garrod ed. 1973: 172, 356)

¹⁰ Published in *Quintet* (Munden 1993: 66).

but they're speed-reading the world

and for more than the gist.

One is fixed on a beetle for lunch

while the other patrols the borders

for thieving geckos and skinks.

I'm prepared for the worst:

if a colour-zone changes on the map

then a nifty swop of battledress

steadies my goggling pulse.

I see a lot of the poet in this chameleon; the use of the first person is revealing.

"Watchful" is a term that chimes with how Gadamer "conceives of understanding, and interpretation [as] a practically oriented mode of insight—a mode of insight that has its own rationality irreducible to any simple rule or set of rules, that cannot be directly taught, and that is always oriented to the particular case at hand." (Malpas 2013)

This watchfulness is highly engaged. As Barsham says:

If Keats' letters helped to foster a cult of the poet as a uniquely self-creating being, the writer today is defined against a different context and shaped by a different set of imperatives. Working as an international rather than national figure, a performer rather than a recluse, a negotiator of networks rather than a solitary dreamer, the contemporary writer faces challenging conditions. (2011: 62)

She quotes a fellow conference delegate:

Biespiel's analogy of the writer as a high diver is a memorable one. Rejecting instruction on the diving board itself, the experienced diver prefers to "figure it out in the air" instead. (ibid.: 60)¹¹

¹¹ David Biespiel's paper on writing & spirituality was delivered at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Conference in Washington DC, 2 February 2011.

This is a high-risk strategy, but in tracing my own origins as a writer, in the next chapter, I see how "the deep end" presents itself, urging the fledgling writer to leap in and thereby begin to define an approach to work, indeed to life.

If I were to take issue with the diver analogy, it would be with regard to its sense of *performance*. I accept that as a strength in certain writers, but where is the *doubt*? Writing, for me, is not a stunt. My chameleon may be anthropomorphic, but it is nervously alive; it may seem preoccupied with self, but it is a fragile entity whose task is to be alert to the wider world.

The chameleon is both the watcher and the watched, the poem therefore reflexive in a way that characterizes my attitude to the art, an embodiment of the poetry channel, a means by which alertness to the world is conveyed. Kate Maguire (2012: 42) refers to a similar type of channelling with reference to the "knowledge hermeneut" operating within interdisciplinary studies.¹²

My own investigations here lead me to consider poetry's hermeneutic role and, by extension, poetry as a *meta-discipline*, a means of approaching *metanoia*. There is irony in this, since poetry resists *being interpreted*, but its interpretative capabilities are considerable. Knowledge hermeneuts are, after all, as Maguire (ibid.) points out, "derivatives of Thoth" and his later incarnation Hermes Trismegistus: i.e. messengers, storytellers – and tricksters.¹³

The poet/trickster is a messenger *trans-lating* from one realm to another with metaphor as his/her *métier*. *Trans-lation* is both a relocation and a means of creating a new communicative co-existence, an interlinking, a *métissage*. In writing poems on scientific themes, as explored in Chapter 3, I am not so much translating the science in an *interpretative* sense, as taking its messages to new auditoria, encouraging reflection amongst all involved, with the *unexpected* an important part of the equation. It is nevertheless useful to consider here, briefly, the more recognized role of the poet/translator and the relationship between

¹² "The hermeneut is also the anthropologist evolving from the 'observer', trying to bracket off their own experience, to the 'participant observer' recognising the reflexivity required to fully comprehend human impact on each other and the world, to the 'advocate' who can no longer separate themselves from what they have encountered once they have uncovered the internal connection which Bruns (1992: 252) believes is a prerequisite for understanding." (Maguire 2012: 42)

¹³ I am fascinated by the connection here to Tristram Shandy (a presiding spirit within *Asterisk*, Chapter 4), whose christening was a translation error, his father's choice being Trismegistus.

"original" and "translated" texts. Muldoon, in a *Paris Review* interview comments:

A translated poem is necessarily a new thing, but it has a relationship with the original. Or, as I'm beginning to think more and more, both have a relationship with some text of which each, original and translation, is a manifestation. (2004)

In his collection of Oxford Lectures on Poetry, Muldoon (2006) considers whether a poem may be "completed – as opposed to undone – by the act of translation". He also contemplates the idea of translation effecting a metamorphosis across time, quoting Walter Benjamin who, in "The Task of the Translator" (1923), states:

it can be demonstrated that no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change. (in Benjamin 1970: 73)

There is a connection here to Eliot's idea that "existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them." (Eliot 1932: 15)

Matei Calinescu, quoting Steiner's statement that "The work translated is enhanced" (Steiner 1975: 300) claims that this is "true not only of translation but indeed of all authentic interpretation". (Calinescu 1979: 14) He continues:

Interpretation is always part of a dialogue: the interpreter listens, tries to understand, then speaks. When his response is adequate, the interpreted work is enriched, and so is the interpreter. Should I add that by "adequacy" in this context I mean a faithfulness which can only result from imagination? (ibid.)

This combination of faithfulness and imagination is intriguing. One of my own more bizarre acts of translation was to take extracts from my schoolboy diary and present them verbatim as a poem, "Mnemonics"; seven stanzas as days of the week, e.g.

Orchestra not bad but we know the pieces too well.
Started to hatch brine shrimps which I don't think

will work. Sixth in triple jump though nearly second.¹⁴

I am fascinated by that phrase about knowing the pieces too well. It is hardly a defensible attitude towards gaining musical excellence, but that has not been my chosen path. I side with the chameleon's jumpiness, with refusing to rehearse things to death, with a poem's ability to channel some important aspect of experience without losing its innocence. Admittedly, a poem usually has to work harder than "Mnemonics". The chameleon's "goggling pulse" needs constructing, or at least reaching for – from some imaginative source beyond one's own haphazard chronicles. Perhaps, however, those chronicles are not entirely haphazard, but share something of what Heaney (1979: 56) describes in his poem, "Song":

.... that moment when the bird sings very close
To the music of what happens.¹⁵

Whether we talk of an "original" or "translated" text, Heaney's words are an eloquent match. It is perhaps not surprising that many poets embrace the role of translator as if it is the ultimate badge, that of the poet's poet. Octavio Paz, however, remarks that "In theory, only poets should translate poetry; in practice, poets are rarely good translators. They almost invariably use the foreign poem as a point of departure toward their own." (1971 in Schulte and Biguenet eds. 1992: 158) This is a perceptive comment, reflecting poetry's inescapable self-interest, whether its notional subject is autobiography, another text, or something more political. The prize we set on *personal voice* within poetry underlines this idea.

The poet Geoffrey Hill has commented extensively on matters of public and personal interaction within poetry. Asked by John Haffenden (1981: 86) "do you disavow that poetry has anything to do with the personality of the writer?" he answers: "No, I don't. I deny that it has anything to do with the display of the personality of the writer." Hill has been critical of much contemporary poetry, dismissing it as consisting of stills from home movies.¹⁶ It is easy to nod in

¹⁴ Published in *Poetry Introduction 7* (Munden 1990: 59). Faber might be surprised to know they published such "original" material. See Appendix B for full poem.

¹⁵ Heaney is quoting from James Stephens' story of Fionn in *Irish Fairy Tales* (Stephens 1920), itself a version of an oral narrative.

¹⁶ This, as I recall, was a remark made at a reading given by Hill in 1980 at York University. It is a theme he must have taken up elsewhere too, judging from comment at <https://jacket2.org/commentary/mister-ld> [Accessed 18 October 2013].

agreement. Instead, I wrote a poem *titled* "Home Movies", involving a display of home movie paraphernalia, and asking:

What's left of childhood
other than the disconnected moments
when a camera was at wobbly hand?¹⁷

The detail within the poem is highly personal, but I would defend it against Hill's hated "self-expressiveness of a vulgarly spontaneous kind" (Haffenden 1981: 87), because its subject is the technology – be it ciné camera or poem – by which we record the elusive present and reflect on the past, every bit as relevant to public events as to private lives. As "recorded" in this study, my own attentions have been to both.

Tom Paulin, in his introduction to *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (1986: 40), remarks that "Sadly, it would seem that political verse is virtually a lost art in England now". Perhaps that came across as a challenge. I believe the situation has changed, perhaps with a modification of the term "political". Paulin himself points out that "the choice of a political subject entails no necessary or complete commitment to an ideology" (ibid.: 15) and I suspect that poets are happier with the idea of being socially engaged, writing poetry that has political relevance without being labelled as such. On another front, the rise of poetry slams, with poets competing for instant attention, has been a driving force: it is easier to grab an audience by the scruff of the neck with topical material; and some of politics' own rhetoric comes into play.

Questioned by Haffenden (1981: 170), Paulin states that "Relevance is a gruelling and philistine ethic—those people who insist that art must be relevant actually hate art" but Paulin, in Haffenden's words, has "a strong sense of the social function of poetry, in the sense that it must be concerned with human values." (ibid.: 160) Paulin confirms this, commenting how "poets such as Zbigniew Herbert, Różewicz, Holub, remind us that in Eastern Europe the poet has a responsibility both to art and society, and that this responsibility is single and indivisible. The poet, in Joyce's special use of the term, is the 'conscience' of his or her society." (Paulin 1986: 17)

My own interaction with this, as described in Chapter 3, has been unusual.

¹⁷ Published in *Illuminations* (Munden 1992: 41-42). See Appendix B for the full poem.

Working for the British Council, I have brought poetry into conversation with topics of scientific and social concern in a form of aforementioned *métissage*. I see this as an adventurous type of "knowledgescape" as described by Duarte, Rosa and Seruya (2006: 4) in reference to Translation Studies:

the migration of ideas, concepts and methods across disciplinary bounds that increasingly characterize the field where research in the humanities is staked out today [...] not a discipline, not even an interdiscipline, but rather a principle of flux, of unceasing intersections and realignments, an interfacing domain where thought becomes nomadic, where a multiplicity of language-games can co-exist, clash, intermingle and cross-fertilize: in short, a ghost-like presence to haunt us out of enclosures and rigidities.

This connects with my NAWÉ work, positioning poetry (and Creative Writing generally) as a vital element in education. There is irony here, since "positioning" has involved a degree of formalizing and defining – even compartmentalizing – that is somewhat antithetical to the art.¹⁸

As I explore in Chapter 5, my dealings with formal education systems have been mindful of this tension. Insisting on the validity of Creative Writing as a discipline has carried a contradiction, being opposed to compartmentalized study.¹⁹ According to Harper (1997: 23) the characteristics of a Creative Writing student "include an awareness of how to learn, an appreciation of the dynamic nature of the personal learning process and the ability to challenge existing partially developed skills. The reconciliation of instinct and intelligence, rather than intellectual immobility, is tantamount to what Harri-Augstein and Thomas call a learning conversation, something a compartmentalized curriculum effectively denies."²⁰

In negotiating this territory, Negative Capability again looms large. Maggie Butt (2011: 59–61), researching the opinions of contemporary poets, found

¹⁸ As Graeme Harper (1997: 22–23) points out: "For the student of Creative Writing any immobility or immobile pedagogic programme interrupts the meaning, acting and perceiving cycle that education should initiate."

¹⁹ The emergence of Creative Writing as an interdiscipline mirrors that of Theory in the nineteenth century, as described by Richard Rorty (1982). The uneasy relationship between Creative Writing and Literary Theory is perhaps a battle of interdisciplinary chiefs.

²⁰ In place of "learning conversations", Maguire (2012: 43) prefers "edifying conversations (Rorty 1979: 360) as this stresses the enriching potential of encounters between difference." This certainly feels appropriate to the poetry/science encounters at British Council events discussed in Chapter 3.

unanimity regarding the value of "being in uncertainties" but a more qualified response to whether or not the writing workshop supported that principle. Paula Milne, at a screenwriting conference I attended in 2000, warned new writers not to go to too many workshops, implying that it is all too easy to turn into a workshop junkie. Geoffrey Hill (2000) goes further:

I couldn't bear to take part in a poetry workshop, either as a student or as an instructor. And I have a very deep philosophical disagreement with the whole concept of formal creative-writing courses leading to "professional" qualification.

Is Hill rejecting the word "professional" or "qualification"? Either way, he would seem to be endorsing, unwittingly perhaps, the self-contradictory "professional English cult of the amateur". (Paulin 1986: 46)

I am not without sympathy for Hill's point of view, but in leading NAWE as Subject Association, and in advocating the benefits of treating writing both as something to be learned and as a serious career, I am bound to disagree with his absolutism. Contradictions can and do coexist. Pauly (2003: 51) remarks how, "In their *A to Z to Métissages* [...] F. Laplantine and A. Nouss reject the all-too common assimilation of *métissage* with the notions of fusion, *mélange*, hybridity or syncreticity. *Métissage*, they contend, is not a fusion but an alloy; it is both conjunctive and disjunctive; it does not seek to resolve contradictions, but to understand them."

There is, undoubtedly, an essential contradiction at the heart of teaching poetry. Bruns refers to "the tradition of poetics, whose task has always been the demystification of divine madness, the restraint of genius by rules. Poetics turns poetry to rational account by seeming to make it teachable, even though it is still theoretically mad." (1992: 231) Reminding us how "freedom is internal to constraint as resistance of the constrained" he quotes Waldenfels:

"If we should one day succeed in taming all that resists, in ruling out the unruly and in filling in all the blanks, the game would be up" [...] This is also the moral of Tristram Shandy. (ibid.: 260)

These contradictions are compounded when considering a poetry *career*. As Andrew Chesterman (2006: 19) points out, with reference to translators: "we have no monopoly over a particular social value (such as health, for the medical

profession), nor are there (yet) compulsory accreditation procedures". The same could be said of poets. We are, interestingly, more comfortable with the idea of entrepreneurialism, of a poetry *business*. My purpose in this study is to make sense of that concept, to show how the poet's necessary innocence – or "necessary receptivity and necessary laziness" as Eliot (1932: 17) puts it – can be preserved when in harness to a range of pragmatic considerations; innocence and experience in fluid co-existence, in a way that poststructuralists might well approve.

*

All I wish is, that it may be a lesson to the world, "to let people tell their stories their own way." (Sterne 1767 in Campbell Ross ed. 1998: 524)

I take this phrase from *Tristram Shandy* to heart. It appears in *Asterisk* and underpins my every effort to support Creative Writing in education in ways that remain true to the art.

What follows here is a retrospective search for key moments of both innocence and experience, the story of an emerging poet prepared to venture into the unknown, and becoming increasingly involved with *preparedness* itself. It charts the development of a poetic voice, and considers too the responsibility of developing a voice for an organization. In my concluding chapter, I consider how the two voices are entwined – and, perhaps, how they may need to be disentangled. It is a story I believe will be of value to other adventurers in the poetry business. A particular value, I hope, will be to the immediate members of the community I serve, responsible for the future of NAWÉ.

In between the chapters are poems acting as *transitoires*, a term used by Nigel Kennedy for musical transitions:²¹ literally translated, they are *transitory*; the noun *transition* would mean something else, fixed. Kennedy's idea is for something more fluid, something to be re-improvised on each performance or encounter.

The poems are not new, or even newly redrafted, but they are *transitoires* in making new, transitional, provisional meanings and links between chapters.

²¹ Kennedy uses this term first in his collaborations with Stephen Duffy on *Music in Colors* (Duffy 2004), later in *A Very Nice Album* (Kennedy 2008). His recent renditions of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* adopt a similar bridging technique.

They are channels between islands, each one a body of water, with shifting currents. It feels to me as if they have been written afresh. They are little enactments of how this reflexive research has, in Benjamin or Eliot's terms, enabled existing work to experience a creative renewal.

Skiffle²²

The bass is a long piece of elastic
stretched on a broomstick.

An empty barrel of homebrew
doubles as a drum

and this is just the formal set.
You're free to join in
with an improvised maraca –
that handy jar of rice.

My baby daughter beats
not-quite-time with a wooden spoon
on a saucepan: I click a pen
against my teeth.

Can you picture all this?
I lack the studio's big budget
to put it on celluloid
before your very eyes –

my word will have to do.
It's not much, I admit. Sometimes
the sound carries no further
than this room.

²² First published in *Poetry Introduction* 7 (Munden 1990: 56).

2: The Deep End

In his book *Always Playing*, violinist Nigel Kennedy²³ makes a point of skipping the "biographical shit", "where my Mum was born or why my Dad left before I popped up" (1991: 1), but he is already telling the reader something significant. There's a story in the making, based on facts, and it always starts earlier than you tend to think. As Kennedy says: "Being just a 'small person' doesn't stop you forming opinions." (ibid.)

Juvenilia can be embarrassing. Finding an early poem of mine called "Benchmarks", however, in the context of a study on public works that include a Creative Writing Benchmark Statement (NAWE 2008), is immediately fascinating. One section begins with my own initials:

PWAM. Whenever he saw my monogram
he thought of the cartoon Caped Crusader
defying gravity, zig-zag captions
socking it to the jaw. To see him then
on a TV quiz show, using his formidable knowledge
to notch up points in cash, was to bring back
his shock at finding me *something of a poet*.
I tried the title like a bandit's mask.²⁴

There is fact here: my initials; my teacher's reaction; his comment to me in class, when I read out a poem I had written, possibly my first; and his subsequent appearance – years later – on a quiz show. You could even say the whole poem was based on fact, a batting to and fro of chronicled reactions to real events. And yet the final line, even though it derives as a logical simile relating to the earlier Batman imagery, packs a different punch. Here I am, aged 12(?), seemingly contemplating what it might mean to be a poet. I suspect it is a trick. There might have been curious contemplation of some sort, but I reckon the bandit idea came only when writing the poem in my 20s. It is an unpublished poem that possibly packs very little punch at all for the objective reader, but I personally find the "bandit's mask" a compelling image as I encounter it now, trying to grapple with the origins of my work: my sense of the world and my place within it *already as a writer*, writer moreover *as outlaw*, and

²³ Or violin *maverick*, as the Radio Times (2013) Proms programme described him.

²⁴ From an unpublished typescript (c. 1985) in the possession of the author.

with clear pride in the title.

The poem, over the course of twenty-five parts, each of eight lines, stitches together moments from childhood, some of them embarrassing, all relating to school. It is, in a sense an "alternative" take on education; the Benchmarks are of my own maverick making. They also refer frequently to my parents, who had both died by the time my education was done.

It occurs to me now that my schooling had an aspect of public works. I gained a place as chorister in Winchester Cathedral, and for three formative years my education was linked to the associated duties. The daily public services, the vocal training, the learning of an outstanding musical repertoire and, perhaps most importantly, the exposure to the language of the psalms and other liturgical poetries surely outweighed the more common curriculum. It was an almost total immersion, from choir practice after breakfast to evensong before supper. This was of course also *private* schooling (by virtue of a scholarship), something I would react against when considering education from the perspective of a parent, and in terms of equality of opportunity.

The scholarship *voice trials* feature in "Benchmarks"; they are in fact the poem's first words²⁵ – and what else are juvenilia?

I recently witnessed poetry by choristers performed in the cathedral. I thought how it might have been improved, had those pupils had contact with a professional poet. Equality of opportunity cannot exclude the privileged; public funds should not give them access to artists, but they should nevertheless be told of the *benefits* of such access. Those benefits are what I have spent a large proportion of my life investigating and making known.

Whenever I come across figures from that cloistered world I inhabited aged twelve, questions are asked about subsequent trajectories, tending to assume either a musical career or, at the very least, musical pursuits. I hardly buck the trend, still playing violin and piano, occasionally writing music on computer, and writing a book on a famous violinist, but I still don't quite conform. I haven't pursued singing. Voice, for me, has other connotations.

²⁵ Typically, I write that "What I sang didn't stick, just one question from the written test of General Knowledge: Which footballer/ was last transferred for a record fee?/ (£120,000 – I even recall the sum.)/ Martin Chivers, of course."

When I moved to my next school, I left those cathedral rituals behind, but words and music remained prime interests, both within the curriculum and beyond. The joy of English, for me, was imaginative writing. Our teacher introduced us to Ted Hughes' *Poetry in the Making* (1967), and although it contains exemplar poems by a wide range of poets, it was Hughes' own poems that struck me most powerfully. It was a bold thing to do, use one's own writing as examples of craft, but it worked, and has in a sense become the model of what many writers do when visiting schools: present their own work as a stimulus for students writing poems of their own, with inside information on how it is done. *Poetry in the Making* works so well that a teacher can stand in pretty effectively for Hughes. Steve Room, our teacher, was certainly good at it, inspiring in his own right. It never occurred to me that Hughes or any published poet would actually appear in the classroom. It no doubt happened (and I have heard of the "unknown" Seamus Heaney making such a visit), but not in my school.

Ted Hughes' work featured as an O Level set text together with poems by Thom Gunn (1962).²⁶ This didn't seem like schoolwork; this was a treat. It led me, for the first time, to the poetry shelves of WH Smith, where I found *Crow* (1972), Hughes' savage sequence of poems that was written in the aftermath of the suicide of his wife, Sylvia Plath, and only completed after the similar suicide of his lover Assia Wevill. I read it first as delicious black comedy, with religion getting a good bashing, but it soon led me to discover Plath's own poems, and by that stage I was hooked. Never mind the difficulty, these poems glittered with irresistible allure.

Where did this take me? Into A Level Literature and then a degree, but the side-steps were as significant. Poetry had burst out of its curriculum domain. I wrote it. I worked on its place in the school magazine. I staged a dramatic performance of *Crow*, with a friend on piano. There may have been no visiting poets, but the school was producing them: Alan Hollinghurst, Paul Hyland... Andrew Motion would later ask me "Was there something in the water?" In a sense, the answer is yes; the environment was certainly conducive. Hollinghurst (2011) writes:

We had a wonderful master at Canford named Paul Merchant, who was also a

²⁶ For a whole generation, Hughes and Gunn were linked – and for no other real reason.

poet and who knew Ted Hughes. Paul really introduced me to the whole world of contemporary poetry, and under his influence I started writing a lot of free verse. With his father and Hughes he ran a small press that published a book of Paul's poems, with lithographs by Barbara Hepworth. That sort of thing probably affected my sense of what poetry might be like—lapidary, elliptical, by which I perhaps mean a bit hard to follow. It was a question not of mimicking an ancient form but of taking imaginative leaps.

Paul Merchant left just as I arrived, but his poetry appears in the school magazine of that year, together with that of Hollinghurst. My own gang now moved in on the production.²⁷ This, to me, was every bit as fascinating as writing itself. The magazine was for general creative work, so text rubbed shoulders with visual art, the art sometimes used as a direct accompaniment to a poem or story. Delving back into the 1973 edition²⁸, I see there was one aspect of production that was beyond our control: advertisements.

*Be one of the world's most wanted people.
Qualify as a
Chartered Accountant.*

I would however have liked the sound of the further text:

You'll find you've got freedom too. Freedom to choose how you work and where you work [...]

Choosing a career at that stage seemed unreal. University was the assumed path, and that was not posed as relating in any way to subsequent work. I briefly questioned this, considering film school instead. I had a real passion in that direction, but entry to the National Film School required evidence of passion in the form of a film. I did buy myself a Super 8 camera, though it was really a toy, and tried my hand at mini scripts.

It was during that final school year that my father died. He had been ill with cancer for months, so it was not a total surprise, just a shock to the soul, as I imagine the death of a parent always is. Aged eighteen, the shock is in one

²⁷ This included Tim Shortis, instigator of AQA's English Language A Level and now co-running Poetry by Heart, and Mark Dugdale, a co-developer (with NAWA) of Cut a Long Story (cutalongstory.com) the new website publishing short stories for e-readers.

²⁸ *Wade's Boat*, copy in the possession of the author.

sense especially severe, in another sense blurred by bewilderment. The impact rumbles on and I have written about it in several poems.²⁹

Recently, researching the variety of Creative Writing programmes in higher education, I learned how one prestigious programme, in selecting students, favours those who have had some personal difficulty to overcome. Had such a programme existed in the late 1970s, I would have qualified well, and thrived. As it was I felt adrift, which in the end meant going with the flow, the predictable English Literature BA. My choice was York, where the interview room had an intimidating F.R. Leavis name plate on the door. Leavis was actually long gone, and my interview was a pleasant surprise; I was able to talk about my writing, which was positively received, despite the fact that York did not teach such a thing.³⁰ Paradoxically, however, it assisted me in subverting the system. My supervisor, Hugh Haughton, approved me submitting, as my Independent Paper, a collection of poems. It was the only paper for which I received a 1st. My final exams were complicated by a further personal loss, my mother dying from a sudden brain haemorrhage. It was then that I really knew the meaning of "adrift".

At York, as at school, I spent much of my time on the *business* of poetry, as distinct from study: running the Poetry Society, organizing visiting poets, producing (and selling) a magazine – so much, I now recognize, that has characterized my work ever since. The extra-curricular activity was taking over, primarily as a passion but also as a vocational preparation for the self-employment I would subsequently pursue; each merged into the other. Remaining in York after graduation, I ran writing workshops, earning my first tiny income from the student club I had helped to shape. It was the lowliest rung on a ladder that was not even in view, but when, a while later, a professional writer had to withdraw from tutoring a Creative Writing class run by the University of Hull, I was there in the frame, somehow known for what I did, and willing to step in.

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²⁹ Notably "Home Movies", in Appendix B.

³⁰ York remains one of the very few universities not to offer Creative Writing.

Stepping in is what writers do, and it is often in *at the deep end*, asked to undertake work that is not *writing* at all: touring, visiting schools, teaching, staring nonplussed at a badge that says "conference poet".

It was essentially because of this that a meeting was held one bitterly cold day in February 1987. Maura Dooley (who had run the York University Poetry Society before me) was then co-director of the Arvon Foundation Centre at Lumb Bank, the fabulous house formerly owned by Ted Hughes. The place filled up with writers, and this gathering itself was a deep end for me. I listened to stories of writers doing things the hard way, with no preparation or support. The idea of visiting schools seemed both exciting and scary. There was clearly a lot happening, but not often with clear planning or purpose. The lead figures at the meeting, Graham Mort and John Killick, proposed a solution: a Northern Association of Writers in Education. A NAWE manifesto was drafted, the first aim being "to promote the educational ideals of writers who work at all levels in education and to make the benefits of their work available to a wider cross-section of students." (NAWE 1988) "Education" was defined as "any area where a group of students are involved in the learning process, whether it be in a school, college, university, hospital, prison or factory." (ibid.) The deep end was also bewilderingly wide.

Further to the ideals, there were practical plans: a directory of writers available for work; an attachment scheme for less experienced writers; a publication to which writers and teachers could contribute; and writing courses – for writers peer-learning and for teachers learning writers' techniques for themselves. Revisiting that manifesto, I am impressed by how it has stood the test of time; it is still a pretty accurate depiction of NAWE that is now the *National* Association, with membership ten times the size. If one thing niggles, it is the mention of those courses for teachers. That aim was perhaps the most ambitious; it certainly remains the least achieved.

The fledgling NAWE was clearly an organization to which I wanted to belong and I signed up for the very first training course offered for writers in schools.³¹ The course brought writers and teachers together, setting up partnerships to be pursued in the classroom. I worked with Stuart Pickford, teacher at St Aidan's in Harrogate (and now himself a published poet), and we devised a plan to take his

³¹ The course was held at Grantley Hall, North Yorkshire, 15-17 July 1988, and was tutored by poets Pete Morgan and Catherine Byron.

students to Fountains Abbey, using the ruins and landscape as inspiration for poems. It was around that time that I was working on a collection of poems with photographs of the Castle Howard estate, *Henderskelfe* (Heaton and Munden 1989), but I am not sure which came first, my own creative project or the focus chosen for work with the school. The blurred lines here seem appropriate, the writer's various activities seen as a single endeavour. Personal preoccupations drive one's own writing *and*, as a consequence, the strategies employed when facilitating writing in schools or elsewhere. Equally, work undertaken with students or in any collaborative project nourishes one's own creative practice.³²

"Training" for writers in schools is perhaps then not the correct term for what is required. Every effort made on this front, over NAWE's 25 years, has been to encourage individual writers to form strategies of their own, not to conform to (or disseminate) some homogenized notion of how writers are inspired or go about their work. Knowledge of the curriculum certainly helps, as does a grasp of classroom management and the range of approaches that tend to succeed. Most important, however, is to gain the necessary confidence in presenting one's own creative work and identifying particular strengths and techniques that can be shared with authority. It is also the case that any "isolated" training course is only so good; you need to experience the actual classroom, as trainee teachers do; hence NAWE's later attachment schemes.

Confidence is not a given. There are of course well-known writers who visit schools, particularly writers of children's books, but it is often the less established writer who fits the bill, perhaps with more available time and a willingness to muck in, often doing more difficult work than the "celebrity" author who merely reads from his or her own books and whose generosity is sometimes less forthcoming. There is perhaps an openness, a sense of equality, an understanding of the student's struggle that a "new" writer may share better than most. Writers without a substantial publication record may first make their mark through their work in education. That was certainly true for me.

Confidence is boosted in various ways. When I submitted poems towards my degree, I also had the impudence to send them to Ted Hughes. He was kind enough to reply, saying how he read the work "with real pleasure and surprise. You've a really natural eloquent way of dancing through your ideas –

³² Many NAWE members have written about this two-way effect, and Philip Gross (2010) has published an entire collection deriving from his work with young people.

imaginative and comic. I hope I shall see more of your things."³³ The value of such comment is hard to overestimate, and many writers attest to similar formative encouragement. How I would have loved Hughes to read *Asterisk* and know where his words of support had led. When Michael Morpurgo, a lifelong friend of Hughes, read at the NAWE Conference in 2007, he signed my copy of *All Around the Year*, which they co-authored (1979) "for Ted H too. So sad that he's not around to do it himself". Sad indeed, but the stand-in signing, made without a prompt, somehow offered a meaningful reconnect.

I am compressing time and possibly making things sound too neat. Progress in fact felt slow. I spent eight years applying for awards and sending poems to magazines. One poem, "The Practice Room"³⁴ was sent to every tiny publication I could find. The blanket rejections suggested the poem was not up to scratch, but then Peter Porter chose it for broadcast on BBC Radio 3. It was also included in the set of my work published in Faber's *Poetry Introduction 7* (Munden 1990: 53-65) and in the *Gregory Anthology* (Brownjohn and Gransden eds. 1990), when patience again paid off after eight annual applications to the Gregory Trust for one of their awards made to poets under the age of thirty. If "success" had come earlier, or if I had been in demand as a writer in schools, then perhaps I would not have been so ready to work for NAWE itself – first as secretary, then Chair, later taking on the role of Development Worker and eventually Director. A critical balancing act was coming into play, between developing as a writer, teacher and creative administrator.

I supported my patience through work in a bookshop whose owners had the enlightened idea of employing part-time staff on a week-on, week-off basis, giving us proper time to pursue our more passionate pursuits. It was there that I met Peter Heaton, photographer, with whom I collaborated on *Henderskelfe* (Heaton and Munden 1989), also Kit Monkman, son of the curator at Shandy Hall. If that too sounds absurdly neat, it was not without digression. Kit was keen on writing music for TV, and commandeered my help. We made a demo tape, sent it to the BBC, and were stunned to be chosen to write music for a documentary on the CIA. When, however, the producer researching in the US was involved in a near fatal car crash and suffered months in a coma, a new producer was brought in – with different ideas. For Kit and I, that particular big break vanished, but a partnership was forged.

³³ Letter of 1979 in the possession of the recipient author.

³⁴ A poem featuring Winchester Choir School days. See Appendix B.

I had remained in touch with a Winchester chorister, Jonathan Louth, who had trained as an architect. In his profession private commissions are the norm, and he generously felt that other professions ought to benefit in the same way. He therefore commissioned me to write a sequence of poems. The idea (based on our mutual background) was for poems set to music, and I recommended Kit as composer. The resulting work, *Loggerheads*³⁵, drew heavily on the psalms in its phrasing. It was also crusadingly "green", foreshadowing the poems I would write when engaged by the British Council on their Climate Change summits. The central "Monkey Songs" were published in a special "green issue" of *Poetry Review* (Munden 1990: 10-11), and the combination of words and music continued to drive much of my work, including two music dramas for schools, *The Losers* (Ashworth and Munden 1997) and *Checkout* (1999, unpublished).

Both Kit and I left the bookshop when sufficiently confident to pursue our own work full time. He set up a multimedia company and I took on teaching work in adult education and for a York St John University BA. I also synopsised novels for a film company operating from a PO Box in Hertfordshire. As chronicled in *Asterisk* (Munden 2011), I found out later that I was working for Stanley Kubrick. When I now give talks to Creative Writing graduates, I refer to this story as an example of why one should be willing to take things on without knowing where they might lead – or indeed what exactly they are all about. The writer, especially in this new digital age, is an entrepreneur, a one-person literature development worker with a highly varied portfolio career.

In adult education during the 1990s new forces were at work. I had stepped into a zone where, despite many freedoms, classes were to be accredited; the learning journal and reflective commentary were becoming *de rigueur*. My students were not in favour of the change but together we learned the ropes. I had come head to head with the biggest issue that would face Creative Writing in education over the next decade and beyond: how should the freedoms of writerly practice be reconciled with the demands of academia?

The hard-won arguments culminated in the publication of NAWE's Creative Writing Subject Benchmark Statement (NAWE 2008). There was, finally, a clear definition of the subject for all to see, a definition that nevertheless stressed openness above prescription. Creative Writing could be seen as a *discipline* without relinquishing its adventuring credentials.

³⁵ First performed at York Arts Centre, 9 June 1990.

Deep ends get ever deeper. At Harrogate College, where I had established a weekly class in 1992, numbers doubled and by 1996 included a young man whose recent motorbike crash had rendered him almost incapable of speech. Without his mother accompanying him to the class, I would not have coped. Even so, it was a tall order. He wanted to tell his story and I was committed to helping him, but there were twenty individuals in the class, with a structured programme of learning to be observed. In many situations, such a problem would be mitigated by systems in place: a student with specific educational needs, enrolled at school or university, would benefit from a level of statutory support and a tutor would not bear the full responsibility of interpreting how best to integrate the student into the programme. In other, less formal situations, however, the tutor is forced to improvise. This became the spur to another NAWE initiative, training writers to work with students with special educational needs.³⁶

It has unfortunately proved difficult to repeat such training, and the list of specific educational contexts in which writers might find themselves continues to expand, making any kind of "comprehensive" training offer impossible.³⁷ It is perhaps some form of "adaptability training" that might stand writers in best stead. Some would say that the Creative Writing courses now offered in higher education provide exactly that.

One further challenge I faced needs mentioning here, that of working abroad. In March 2000 I first attended the annual conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), the nearest equivalent to NAWE in the US, but incomparably vast.³⁸ In the same year, at the invitation of the British Council, I presented NAWE to teachers in Slovakia.³⁹ The relationship established with British Council staff would take me to Argentina, evaluating the Council's literature education programme, and to conferences in Switzerland, encountering experts in a variety of scientific disciplines. This engagement as a

³⁶ See *Creative Writing in Special Education* (NAWE 1995).

³⁷ Further specific initiatives have nevertheless continued to evolve, notably around Creative Writing in Health and Social Care. See Munden (2004: 33) and the special edition of *Writing in Education* (Killick and Howard eds. 2013) on Writing and Dementia.

³⁸ Delegate numbers at a recent event exceeded 10,000. My attendance evolved into a formal NAWE representation of UK Creative Writing programmes and has since been mirrored by work in Australia with the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP).

³⁹ Symposium led by James Sutherland-Smith at Budmerice, Slovakia, 2000.

"conference poet", particularly on the theme of climate change, provided a new focus for my work, explored in the next chapter. I even found myself sharing a stage with Nobel Laureate Rajendra Pachauri at the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in Geneva. It is through this seemingly bewildering trajectory that I have learned my craft – and worked to establish a meaningful framework of support for other writers embarking on adventures of their own.

Countdown⁴⁰

Put on the spot, your mind
goes blank with panic –

Five minutes and counting...

One day you will remember this game

As you stutter, mumble, lose
the thread and repeat yourself –

Four minutes and counting...

One day you will respect this game

And its cruel demands
which leave you tongue-tied –

Three minutes and counting...

One day you will master this game

even with a parched throat
and sweating palms –

Two minutes and counting...

One day you will understand this game

in all its urgency,
its terrible simplicity –

One minute and counting...

One day you will play this game for real.

⁴⁰ First published in the *Bern Manifesto on Climate Change and Cities* (British Council 2006).

Chapter 3: Feeling the Pressure

Asked by the British Council to attend a conference in Basel in 2003 on "ethics and predictive medicine" and provide some reflective input to the subsequent conference report, I was acting, so Caroline Morrissey describes, as "the conference participant's equivalent of the 'naïve reader' [...] the interested non-specialist whose intelligence and critical faculties could provide the questions that specialists may no longer realize need to be asked (and, ideally, answered) and who could present new angles or 'takes' on the issues debated." (British Council 2003: 4) It was only later that I advanced the idea of contributing poems. "Poet", after all, was on my conference badge, much to the bemusement of delegates from scientific research units and pharmaceutical companies, some of whom initially gave me a wide berth. After the report was published, it was a different story. There were appreciative emails from scientists in other countries where the publication was distributed (in considerably greater numbers than achieved by the average poetry book). A minority art, operating like a friendly rebel within a specialist field of research, had somehow managed a little breakthrough, not only expanding the terms of reference for the particular topic, but also helping to nudge poetry back into realms where it is often considered an irrelevance (if considered at all). A deliberate ploy within one poem was to stress the connection of poetry and precision – the latter associated primarily with science. The poem⁴¹ consists of nineteen tiny stanzas, each beginning with the same line, e.g.

Let's be precise
about disease:
there is a cause.

[...]

Let's be precise
about uncertainty:
it is difficult to pin down.

[...]

⁴¹ "Precision", published in *Conflicts of Interest* (British Council 2003). See Appendix B for the full poem.

Let's be precise
about language:
it helps.

The play on language is part of the purpose, aiming to position *language play* as a valid instrument of investigation and learning. Metaphor and other poetic devices can complement the microscope or scalpel. The truth of this is perhaps more apparent to the quantum physicist than the literary critic; adventurous scientific theory often proceeds by analogical thinking, leaving some *literati* looking a little parochial by comparison. It may, ironically, be poets and poetry publishers who prolong the myth of poetry as a marginal pursuit, with slim volumes targeted at a minimalist audience. In his poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", Auden (1977: 242) wrote that "poetry makes nothing happen", a line guaranteed to be quoted *ad infinitum*. Adrian Mitchell's (1964) statement that "Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people" is equally well known but more combative, convinced that poetry *can* be more relevant if only it tries.

I saw Adrian Mitchell perform in York, in 1995. His work was persuasive and his attitude infectious. For me, Mitchell's poetry was adventurous in its embrace not only of "people" but also issues and ideas too often viewed as the preserve of "other" types of writing.⁴² His opinion about "most poetry" chimes with Caroline Morrissey's comment about the typical conference debate, which is "by definition limited to a comparatively small circle, whereas the answers it provides – and the many more questions it raises – should be available and accessible to the public." (British Council 2003: 4-5) Her decision to involve a poet was a fundamental part of her mission to make the conference publication more accessible. Such an imaginative approach might well have been a one-off, an experiment, but she pursued it further over the next six years, even when radical restructuring of the Council began to make such autonomous regional initiatives more difficult.

Caroline's genius was to keep things on a casual basis. In Basel, some kind of written response was expected, but at subsequent events my brief was simply to "attend", with no explicit requirement to write. The pressure was more subtle. My badge changed from "Poet" to "Conference Poet" and it is hard to imagine

⁴² Mitchell was famed for his pacifism and socialist beliefs. His mother was "a Fabian socialist nursery school teacher who 'encouraged me to argue'" (Horowitz 2008) and his father a research chemist.

accepting that title without producing any *output*. Also, in Basel I had been part of a team; now I was the sole maverick interpreter, the universal outsider.

The second conference I attended, "Not for Sale", focused on the traffic in looted artefacts from Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond. I was privileged to hear the complexities of the subject explored by "archaeologists, curators, collectors, dealers and auction houses alongside those who drafted the new laws and those who have to apply them". (Munden 2004b: ii)⁴³

Much had been made of what was going wrong: "the looting of the Baghdad Museum, the grotesque destruction of many archaeological sites by mechanical diggers, and the collusion between certain museums [...] and the less reputable collectors." (ibid.) I wanted to tackle ideas of provenance and responsibility from a personal perspective, but where was the connection? The answer came once I was home, surrounded by artefacts I myself had collected, including a fossil from a beach in Dorset, where I grew up.

Already I had the amateur's expert eye
for every delicate white whorled trail
that led through the shale
to a calcified ammonite.

My gentle chiselling
tapped the innocent echo
of an apocalypse; an obliteration
disinterred [...]⁴⁴

My archaeology was hardly a major crime, but the memory enabled me to empathize with collectors whose passion blinds them to other concerns.

In other poems, I focused on the language of the debate, the specialist terminology that I found so intriguing. I wanted to transpose that language into poems, to provide a similar intrigue for the reader. Other poems were driven more by attention to form but the idea of "transposition" still played a part. "Tools of the Trade" and "Rules of Armed Combat" are little more than lists but,

⁴³ See also *Not for Sale* (British Council 2004).

⁴⁴ This and further poems mentioned on this page are published in *Not for Sale* (British Council 2004), and in Appendix B.

cast as poems, they are perhaps read as rather more. The seeming flippancy of the latter's opening command

Whenever entering a military zone,
remember to turn off your mobile phone

moves to a darker conclusion:

Heads may need to roll.
If so, ensure that you retain full control

of those which may prove valuable.
Which they shall.

One comment from Irving Finkel (from the British Museum) struck me powerfully: "Is it better to let something deteriorate in its natural context or conserve it in a private collection?" (Munden 2004b: iii) I can't now help relating that to poetry, with both scenarios coming across as poor options. Finkel made a distinction, referring to ancient tablets, "between the object and its inscription, suggesting that the object may well be the property of a nation but that the inscription – the text – belongs to the world." (ibid.) The distinction is a good one, and poetry (like most literature) escapes the worst fates of the artefact, but its place in the world needs active nurturing nevertheless.

The theme of environment came to the fore in a further event, a "youth summit" on climate change and cities, involving young scientists from Bangladesh, Switzerland and the UK. A five-day debate culminated in the publishing of a *Bern Manifesto* (British Council 2006) – with poems.

Personal detail again played a part, as in the poem where a glacier's "silver tongue and sparkling wit" are compared, in their decline, to my father's degeneration: "soiling the sheets/ with drool from your speechless gums."⁴⁵ List poems also featured. One of them, "Half Truths", makes oblique reference to Adrian Mitchell's "most poetry" comment:

⁴⁵ This and the further poems quoted here and on the following page were all first published in the *Bern Manifesto* (British Council 2006), subsequently in *Feeling the Pressure* (Munden ed. 2008).

50% of science is invaluable;
50% of poems are unread.

Stretching the simple maths to the limit, it concludes:

50% of everything is a generalization;
50% of nothing is less than you think.

I became fascinated by the idea of using mathematical forms as the basis for poems. Presented by scientists with an intriguing equation – hazard x exposure x vulnerability = impact – I created a poem entirely on that structure, repeating it with substituted words, aiming for a sense of escalating risk. The poem ("The Law of Increasing Odds") finally comes full circle, back to the original equation, with the suggestion that it continues in a terrifying spiral. The use of mathematical symbols in poetry is unusual, and certainly a surprising ploy in "popularizing" a concept, but while poetry and mathematical equations might both, individually, be seen as "obscure" or "difficult", the unexpected combination of the two produces an effect that is perhaps captivating – and accessible.

The poems were nourished by the scientific debate both in content and form. They were also influenced by the "communication skills training" the young scientists were undergoing.⁴⁶ The poem "Countdown"⁴⁷ mimics a game they had to play. More generally, the poems use simple, repetitive structures that can be used as instructional models – not necessarily on the original theme. I have used them when working with trainee teachers devising poetry-writing exercises for the classroom.⁴⁸

The summit was followed by a *Café Scientifique*, "an informal setting where experts, members of the public, scientists, politicians and stakeholders can

⁴⁶ There was input to the event from the BBC correspondent, Nick Higham, and Franz Andres, a writing teacher (and NAWA member) from the University of Bern. Their job was to provide "communication skills training", with the aim of helping the young people get their message across to a global audience. The testing ground was a final day at the Stade de Suisse, presenting the prepared arguments to a wider gathering of young leaders in business and politics.

⁴⁷ Printed here on page 32 as *transitoire*.

⁴⁸ My attention to form contrasts with an assumption that is sometimes made, e.g. by Koch (2002) that "eco-poems" are typically in free verse, part of a general association of "wild" and "good".

exchange views." (British Council 2007)⁴⁹ It was a further opportunity to disseminate the poems I had already written – reading them at open evening events – and to write more, on the new theme of climate change and public health.

There was no associated publication; instead, a bigger idea took shape: an anthology of writing on climate change that would incorporate poetry and scientific text. I was given the job of commissioning UK poets to interpret the theme in any way they wished. Twenty-two leading poets rose to the task and the accompanying scientific statements were provided by scientists working at Newcastle University and the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. My own work as conference poet was also included.

We were partly on a mission to refute the notion of art and science inhabiting different worlds and it was gratifying to find that some of the poets in the book are scientists themselves. Scientists and poets both make their most significant discoveries by a mixture of close observation and imaginative leaps. Both are venturing into the unknown with metaphor as a principle tool, not only uncovering the past but sometimes also exploring the future through supposition. Richard Holmes (2008), writing about the Romantic generation of poets and scientists, talks about the Eureka moment that characterizes a certain type of scientific discovery, and I think many poets would describe the sensation of clinching a poem – that rare occasion when you absolutely know you have created something that offers a new glimpse of how the world works – as something very similar to the Eureka moment. It should of course be mentioned that both scientists and poets are rather more familiar with the promise of discovery remaining unfulfilled.

When first asked to describe the idea of the book, I reached for an image – the canary in the coalmine, the songbird possessed of a critical sensitivity enabling it to detect any dangerous build-up of gas, thereby acting as an early warning system. I did not in the end pursue the image, as I thought it was flawed. The canary's warning is through its silence. Some of the poets' songs may be

⁴⁹ It is the informality here that distinguishes the proceedings from transdisciplinary research, described by Cronin (2008) as "a new field of research emerging in the 'knowledge society', which links science and policy to address issues such as environmental degradation, new technologies, public health and social change. Through transdisciplinary approaches researchers from a wide range of disciplines work with each other and external stakeholders to address real world issues (Hadorn et al. 2008)."

distressed but they are songs nevertheless. It is precisely the insistence of their songs that is so powerful.⁵⁰

My working title was *Barometer*, which I liked for its tough, scientific feel, but it was superseded when I chose a barometer picture for the cover. The final title, *Feeling the Pressure*, created counterpoint rather than tautology, and made metaphor of its own. While referring to the atmospheric pressure on the mercury, it also alludes to how individuals might be reacting, in a human sense, and how society too should be feeling the pressure to act. The final cover replaces the words on the barometer with things more extreme: flooding, drought, hurricanes, forest fires, rising sea levels, desertification.

Other anthologies had explored the territory but not in the same way. *Earth Shattering: ecopoems* (Astley 2007) presents a historical selection of poetry relating to environmental disaster. As I wrote in my introduction to the Council's anthology: "This collection, by contrast, is more of a weather report, a British snapshot of intellectual and emotional reaction to things as they stand at the end of 2007." (Munden ed. 2008: 3) At a time of significant debate, that approach seemed an honest one, avoiding grandiose statements or focusing exclusively on doom.

The anthology received significant notice, notably from the WMO in Geneva, where an exhibition of the work was staged before moving into the Palais des Nations. Large prints of the poems were suspended from the ceiling and it was exciting to see a book take flight in this way. (Fig. 1) It coincided with World Meteorological Day (23 March), the theme of which in 2008 was "Observing our planet for a better future", celebrated by WMO members and other individuals from the international meteorological community, including "emergency response managers". (WMO 2008) I was charged with introducing the exhibition in a speech to the assembled delegates⁵¹, many of whom were listening courtesy of a simultaneous translation. I realized, as I spoke, the problems that were arising through my play on language and use of metaphor that was so very British. "Clear as mud", a phrase on which I recklessly extemporized, may well have been an apt description of what took place. There were smiles though, and

⁵⁰ There is though, intriguingly, a poem in the book called "Songs We Did Not Sing" (by John Latham), with its haunting line: "so we didn't sing a cornfield in the evening sun".

⁵¹ See

http://www.wmo.int/pages/publications/meteoworld/archive/april08/munden_en.html [Accessed 9 October 2013].

I believe that the delegates appreciated how a world beyond their usual acquaintance was connecting with their debate. The hanging poems were no longer mere decoration; they were the cause of real interest, and being read.



Figure 1: Hanging display of poems from *Feeling the Pressure* at the WMO, Geneva, 2008.

I nearly wrote here "Then it all went quiet". That was my sense of it, after the buzz of Geneva, but tracking further correspondence, websites and blogs reveals an ongoing impact. There were several subsequent events, including one in Manchester, where poetry and science festivals coincided. The Planet Positive Foundation invited me and other featured poets to contribute to their 2020 Vision Campaign. Stop Climate Chaos, a coalition of 100 organizations, invited me to read at their Annual General Meeting, which took place in the run-up to their march in London on 5 December 2009, just ahead of the meeting of world leaders in Copenhagen to discuss a potential new agreement to keep global warming in check.⁵²

⁵² The Copenhagen Accord was not in the end legally binding but did at least endorse the continuation of the Kyoto Protocol.

Meanwhile, the WMO published my speech on their website, the book was featured by the Swiss Academy of Sciences (2008) on the ProClim site (the Forum for Climate and Global Change) and individual poems were requested from magazine and book editors in various countries, so there is reason to believe that the work was widely distributed and well-received.⁵³ Copies of the anthology were requested for other exhibitions and events, including the Genoa International Poetry Festival and Tipping Point, a German conference bringing together science and the arts. There was even a proposal from KRITI, a communication team in New Delhi, to collaborate with me on producing a contemporary dance/theatre performance based on the poems. Sadly, the necessary funding was not forthcoming. There was however a vocal arrangement made of my poem "Mitigation", by composer Stuart White,⁵⁴ while John Latham's poem, "Songs We Did Not Sing", was set to music by Eric Sweeney.⁵⁵ John reported to me a "unilaterally positive" response to the book from his colleagues in the US, where he works at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Colorado.⁵⁶ How frustrating it was that AWP turned down our proposals to present at conferences in New York and Chicago, where the theme was scarcely covered in programmes each featuring several hundred sessions.

That type of massive silence makes one more grateful for the smaller news, the primary school teacher stumbling on the anthology online when preparing a lesson on climate change with pupils writing their own reports and poems in response. The British Council sent them copies free of charge. "Climate Friendly Bradford on Avon" organized an event within their local arts festival, including short films and an exhibition of work from the anthology, aiming to inspire people to write for themselves. One lady who lived in an old house went away to

⁵³ One lavish publication, *The Changing Range of Light* (Carmel 2009), combined poems with photographs of California's Sierra Nevada.

⁵⁴ Stuart White works for a firm of solicitors and conducts the firm's choir, which was at the time entering a competition (the first of its kind) run by Music for Offices (2009). Other entrants included the likes of John Lewis, Deloitte, Willis, The Guardian, and Norton Rose. In an email, Stuart wrote: "Apart from finding the poem very effective, the theory is that the use of an original and topical piece will gain us extra marks!" His four-minute composition was arranged for soprano, alto, tenor and bass, and despite not winning the competition, was well received by the judges. There was even mention of interest from BP.

⁵⁵ An arrangement for mezzo soprano and baritone soloists with an accompaniment of string quartet and organ, it forms part of a choral work called "Hymn to Gaia", a reflection on the environment, together with other poems and selected texts from Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Native American traditions.

⁵⁶ John Latham's research is on "global temperature stabilization via controlled albedo enhancement of low-level maritime clouds". (Latham et al. 2008)

organize secondary glazing on her windows. Poetry, it seems, can make things happen after all.

The *New York Times* opinion pages picked up on the book, Andrew Revkin (2008) commenting: "I've been told off and on that we'll know society is really absorbing the idea that humans are influencing important Earth systems when the discussion spills out of the environmental niche and into the broader cultural discourse. Do you see signs this is happening?" There have certainly been some indications, at least.

When I was first talking through the structure of the book, with Richard Dawkins from the Tyndall Centre, we came up with several headings in order to break down the science into manageable chunks. It was Richard's suggestion to have a final, additional section titled "Beyond Climate Change". To be honest, I am not sure I understood that title at the time. Now I think I do. Whatever you think about climate change, whatever your reaction to the evidence in terms of cause and effect, the issues are more fundamental. They go beyond reactions to climate change alone, relating to responsible stewardship of the planet. Gordon Brown (2008), in his Speech on the World Economy delivered at the United Nations headquarters in New York, referred to "global supervision", and ending the "era of irresponsibility". I do not know if switching off the lights in my house when I go out does much to reverse climate change; it is still a good principle, not to waste resources. Likewise, I do not know if poetry will ever make a significant impact on conserving the environment but it is surely strengthened as an art if it takes such issues to heart.

For some, of course, the very idea of "poetry" and "climate change" being paired may well confirm their worst suspicions of both. When presenting *Feeling the Pressure* at the Arts in Society conference in Venice, 2009, I was asked (by Graham Mort, one of the contributors): "Has it worked?" Always good at playing devil's advocate, Graham had me floundering, wondering if the project had been absurdly misconceived. Poets (and the general public) will often write in response to events – witness the vast outpouring of verse following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Questions of artistic merit aside, that great bulk of writing expressed more than anything an emotional floundering. Were some of Britain's finest poets to be accused of the same thing? Revisiting the book and its various subsequent trajectories, I feel confident in refuting that idea. Conversing with other disciplines, poetry was taking its rightful place within

debates of real importance. As I wrote at the time, (Munden 2008: 3–4) although "many of the poets have adopted a rather oblique approach, almost seeming to shy away from direct statements about the predicament we face", that reflects an integrity; "they do not claim to have solutions or even some special understanding." (ibid.) Jean Sprackland, speaking at the Manchester event, stood up for us exceptionally well, saying: "all we poets can do is hold the orb up to the light to examine it and hope that doing so makes others look more closely."

The Generation Game⁵⁷

Take a careful look at what is passing
before your eyes:

the nest of teak tables
the cut-glass decanter
the snakeskin bag
the snake
the tropical forest
the chalice of spawn
the prime beach, ripe for development
the loggerhead turtle
the hobby-horse
the ark
the trappings of authority
the bribe to enlist
the anonymous blood
the feud
the poisoned pen
the withdrawal of funds
the hungry child
the memorial silence
the excuse

You've thirty seconds, starting from now:
whatever you remember can be yours.

⁵⁷ First published in *Northern Poetry II* (Chatterjee and Scammell eds. 1991).

Chapter 4: Asterisk

In preparing *Feeling the Pressure* for publication, I worked closely with the British Council's design department in crafting the book as a whole, a skill that I would explore much further with *Asterisk* (Munden 2011), whose publisher was willing to give me total control over production.

My early reading of Hughes and Gunn introduced me to poetry and photography working together. In *Positives* (Gunn 1966), poems are paired with photographs by Thom's brother, Ander. In *Remains of Elmet* (Hughes 1979), poems are matched with photographs by Fay Godwin, whose work had already accompanied Hughes' poems in the Penguin anthology *Worlds*, edited by Geoffrey Summerfield (1974), a lecturer at York while I was a student. Many of Hughes' other works involve similar partnerships, notably with Leonard Baskin. A further influence for me was William Blake, whose combination of word and image came all from the one mind and hand, with the resulting work an organic whole.⁵⁸

It was Geoffrey Summerfield who, in 1979, found me in the university English Department office, using the Roneo printing machine to produce poetry pamphlets created from stencils combining hand-written poems with drawings of my own. With Oliver Comins, a fellow student and poet, I produced a regular magazine in this way. *Sphagnum*, as it was called, carried a quotation from E.V. Watson (1972):

*Few mosses will stand apart in so distinctive a way... One instance, however, is the genus Sphagnum... which covers such an enormous area in bog and wet moorland country... throughout great tracts of desolate landscape in both old and new worlds... The genus also exhibits several unique structural features which cause it to be set apart... its unique dispersal mechanism is another feature of this remarkable genus.*⁵⁹

Ignoring our rather unjustifiable claims to distinctiveness here implied, the ambition to achieve significant distribution is surely to be commended. In reality, as a result of trawling the college dining rooms, we found just enough

⁵⁸ My encounters with Blake were through the fine reproductions by the Trianon Press of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (Keynes ed. 1967) and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Keynes ed. 1975).

⁵⁹ As printed in each of nine editions of *Sphagnum* in the possession of the author.

buyers to cover our costs. Perhaps that is no mean achievement for any poetry publication.

My final fling with the Roneo produced the pamphlet approved towards my BA degree. *Terrible Lizards*⁶⁰ (referring to dinosaurs) took extinction as its subject, and each poem was hand-crafted on the page, the lettering sometimes merging into the drawings. The first poem, "Brontosaurus" makes an explicit reference to Hughes' poem "The Thought Fox".

Ponderous

Not the sudden sharp hot stink of fox
but
a forward lunge onto the page that is desperately slow

Such an upfront homage – allied to the telling use of the word "not" – is one way of moving on, discovering a voice of one's own. I trust that came across to Hughes when he read it.

I continued to dabble in Blakean "illuminated printing", producing individual poems or mini sequences as posters. Some worked reasonably well, but I came to accept that my drawing is not a strength. I had more success using calligraphic and typographical invention, in poems that I hope to include in my *New and Selected* in 2014.⁶¹ (Fig. 2)

Combining poetry with other art, however, remained a major focus. *Henderskelfe* (Heaton and Munden 1989) balanced poems with photographs, with balance itself a theme. Peter Heaton's photographs of Castle Howard are highly formal, sometimes symmetrically composed, and I opted for a style that matched, positioning a pair of stanzas alongside each other on the page, with language playfully mirrored from one to the other.⁶² The interplay between landscape and architecture forms yet another balance.

⁶⁰ Roneo copy (1980) in the possession of the author.

⁶¹ See also Appendix C.

⁶² See Appendix D.



Figure 2: "Advice on building a tortoise cage", handwritten poem, Paul Munden 1993

The *Henderskelfe* poems, however, were experiments. By the time of writing *Asterisk*, also focusing on a house and its grounds, I had a better idea of why such a focus might be fruitful, less of an exercise, and how I could use it to open windows onto a range of personal preoccupations and musings on poetry itself.

Another influence had also been absorbed, that of Paul Muldoon. Despite, or perhaps because of, his extraordinary erudition, there is a whimsical fluency to Muldoon's work, a light-footed ability to take off in any verbal or philosophical direction.⁶³ As with Hughes, I made my own play on the Muldoon influence, this time in the Faber anthology that was my debut with a major publisher.

Paul Munden, Paul Muldoon. Hugh, you
introduced us over a glass of wine,
your mulled voice muddling the occasion.
I was a wisp, while the maestro was
– dare I say it – well-heeled, plump
as a prize mushroom. He leaned forward

⁶³ I was flattered when Christopher Reid (1988: 42), writing about a poem of mine that was published in the *New Statesman & Society*, remarked: "Here the logical legerdemain is as deftly controlled as in any poem by Munden's near-namesake, Muldoon".

to catch my name again, stumbling
on another of his magical half-rhymes.⁶⁴

There was a long gap – twenty-one years – between this "arrival" and *Asterisk*, my first full collection. This was partly on account of my work for NAWE, while also tutoring for several universities and colleges, but my writing had continued, thanks in particular to the British Council commissions, so when *Asterisk* was conceived, I felt ready to do it justice. The process nevertheless took six years.

Shandy Hall is where the 18th century novelist Laurence Sterne lived and wrote *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67), a book that takes the concept of digression to the limit of what can be held together as coherent art. Muldoon, possessed of a similar gift, makes reference to *Tristram Shandy* in his collection, *Why Brownlee left* (1980), and again in *Quoof* (1983). He also regards "*Tristram Shandy* as exemplary of a wider tendency in Irish writing towards the disruption of linearity by way of 'veerings from, over, and back along a line' and a related affinity for 'the notions of di-, trans-, and regression". (Alexander 2010: 143)

Perhaps the digressions of my working life prepared me well for writing *Asterisk*. I had established a connection with Shandy Hall beyond my friendship with those who lived there, choosing it as NAWE's registered office when changing the association's legal status to that of Company Limited by Guarantee.⁶⁵ My knowledge of the house and its history went much deeper than my acquaintance with Castle Howard, and the combination of personal and literary-historical associations I found compelling. Here was a notional "subject" that was more a lens through which a multitude of memories and ideas could be refracted. The Shandean imperative to digress provided the perfect licence to roam, to spin off from the initial point of reference; it also *held* the spin, like a vortex, which can actually pull matter *in*. As a result, for all its madcap adventuring, the book remains grounded in the location where it evolved.

As if this was not fun enough, it plays with being a *guidebook*, in a maverick rather than traditional sense. There is no official guidebook available, so why should poetry not take on the role, with photography as its more familiar

⁶⁴ From "A New Arrival" in *Poetry Introduction 7* (Munden 1990: 55).

⁶⁵ "It seemed highly appropriate to 'base' the work of writers nurturing the next generation in the house sometimes referred to as the birthplace of the modern novel." (Munden 2011a: 230)

accomplice? Sterne, I hope, might have approved such mischief; a guide to imaginative play.

The Shandean licence could be viewed as an indulgence, but it is tempered by a desire to craft the whole capacious venture from multiple angles. The balance between poem and photograph is particularly important: neither should dominate, or make their connections too explicit. This point is well made by Muldoon in *Plan B* (2009), which combines his poems with photographs by Norman McBeath.⁶⁶ Verging on the disingenuous, he suggests that the book was "curated neither by Norman McBeath nor me but by the poems and photographs themselves." (ibid.: 7) Taking on a personified life of their own, they are described as making their own connections, "accompanied by little grunts, the grins and grimaces of recognition." (ibid.) Another book from the same year, *I Spy Pinhole Eye*, (Gross and Denison 2009) presents a series of photographs all of the feet of electricity pylons, with poems making a meditative response. Writing critical articles based on these works was undoubtedly useful in shaping my own project.⁶⁷

In Hughes' collaborations, the relationship between word and image is generally more obvious;⁶⁸ for all their mythical elements, the poems have a focus on the natural world and it works for the photographs to be similarly attentive. In focusing on Shandy Hall, I had similar justification in featuring images of the house and grounds and it is of course the photographs that hold onto the guidebook concept while poems pull away into more fanciful domains. If the connections are sometimes obvious, they have the function of guy ropes, holding a whimsical structure in place. There is further, visual tethering in the page design: each quotation from Sterne which runs vertically, close to the gutter of the book, is on a grey background that interlocks with the photograph and page numbering. There's a surface "decorum" contrasting with the other ideas sent "howling through your head".⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Muldoon refers, amusingly, to the "hazards of a one-to-one relationship between word and image" as dramatized by a Monty Python sketch "in which a voice-over refers to 'the Lord Privy Seal' while we're given, in quick succession, shots of Dali's Christ of St John of the Cross, a toilet-bowl and a shiny seal balancing a shiny ball on its nose." (2009: 7)

⁶⁷ See Munden (2009: 34-36) and Munden (2010: 81-83).

⁶⁸ In *Remains of Elmet* (1979), Hughes' poem "Tree" is accompanied by a Fay Godwin photograph – of a tree; the poem "Grouse-Butts" refers to "spent cartridge cases" that are visible in the accompanying image. In *River* (1983), it sometimes seems perverse when Peter Keen's photographs are *not* closely matched to the poems, e.g. "An Eel" appearing alongside a photograph of mating dragonflies.

⁶⁹ The words here are quoted from the poem "Obsession", in *Asterisk* (Munden 2011: 14).

As if this three-way grip were not enough, there are notes at the back, which, although full of facts, do little to *explain*. Instead, as in the *QI* quiz show hosted by Stephen Fry (who makes a cameo appearance in the book), they offer extra diversions that aim to be "quite interesting" in themselves; "for the curious", one might say. Their content is akin to the introductions given by poets at a reading. I was struck by the inclusion of such introductions in *Adrian Mitchell's Greatest Hits* (1991). I have never seen that done elsewhere, and I imagine it is a concept resisted by most poets and readers alike. Playfully (or perversely), I decided to take the risk, partly to take the guy rope idea to its logical conclusion. I wanted to reveal the invisible ties that connect a poem to its factual, intellectual and emotional hinterland. Even so, some of the notes direct the reader to yet further points of enquiry, stretching the ties beyond the confines of the book.

I have come to view these ties as part of a poem's core structure. In Venice, presenting *Feeling the Pressure*, I came across a sculpture by Tomás Saraceno, (Fig. 3) which I describe in my report for Poetry by Heart:

*It consists of a molecular connection of rubber wires, fixed to the four walls, ceiling and floor. If you pluck any part of it, reverberations can be felt at any other point of the structure, however far across the room. It seems to be a good analogy of how verbal harmonics resonate across the entirety of a poem.*⁷⁰

The construct extends beyond the frame of the photograph, indeed beyond whatever frame is in view. "A twitch upon the thread"⁷¹ of any footnote or verbal elaboration will sing across to any other visible or invisible part of the poem.⁷²

At a Poetry by Heart event for teachers, in 2013, Mario Petrucci pursued this same idea, likening poetry to an aural sculpture, but also stressing the importance of it breathing on the page.⁷³

⁷⁰ Report in the possession of The Full English, the company managing Poetry by Heart.

⁷¹ The phrase is taken from *Brideshead Revisited* (Waugh 1945), which in turn quotes G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown story, "The Queer Feet" (1910). Castle Howard (the subject of *Henderskelfe*) was used in TV and film adaptations of *Brideshead* (in 1981 and 2008 respectively) and the *Asterisk* exhibition at Bank Street Arts made play on this and a related reference in "Testudo" in *Poetry Introduction 7* (Munden 1990: 63–64).

⁷² In a new book, *Analogue/Digital, New and Selected Poems*, commissioned for 2014, I use this idea of endless harmonic relativity as the governing principle of the collection.

⁷³ There are numerous examples of poetry publishing abusing this concept: *Poetry Review's* rendition of my "Monkey Songs" being a case in point. See Appendix E.

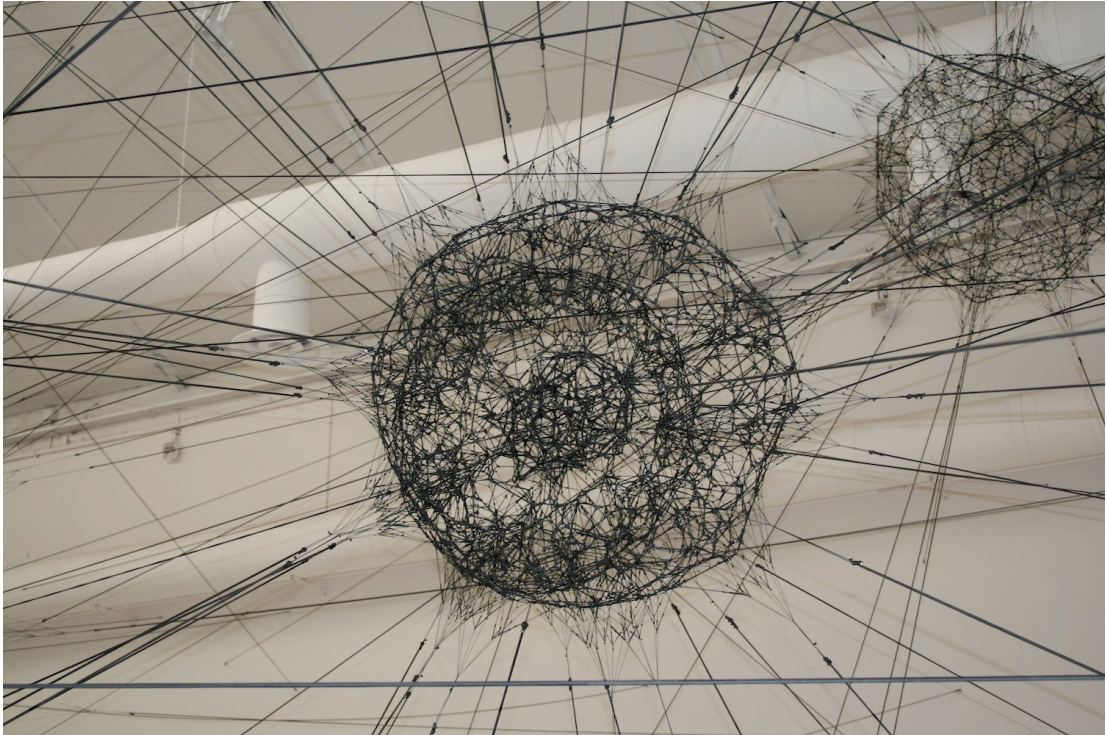


Figure 3: Tomás Saraceno (2008) *Galaxy forming along filaments, like droplets along the strands of a spider's web*, exhibited in the Giardini main exhibition hall at the 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009.

In discussing the musical aspects of poetry, rhythm and melody come to the fore, but it is this notion of harmony that I find most compelling. With *Asterisk*, despite my own musical training and intuitions, it took an editor's ear to help me fine-tune each poem to best effect. Peter Sansom, editor at Smith/Doorstop, considered my use of three-line stanzas a little "lazy", as a result of which I re-worked the title poem quite radically, finding a better structure within the poem's core – the "twin spiral" on which it elaborates. It became obvious that the poem should be in couplets, and I chose to highlight the structure by use of repetition, keeping it as a single (unfinished) sentence/spiral, mimicking the form of DNA. I shared the two versions (as shown overleaf) with teachers involved in Poetry by Heart, exploring how a poem's structure is part of its memorability. It is not simply form *per se* that assists the reader in holding the poem in his or her head (or heart), but form indivisible from meaning. Memorability, part of poetry's own DNA, is a visible aspect of this poem's ambition.

Title Poem * - early draft

Maybe it was an errant glass of Burgundy

spilled over the keyboard
while working too late into the night

which made the fizzling short circuit
and an asterisk
every time you typed a carriage return,

rendering each new line
both a novelty and a frustration,
building an eternal footnote -

the spiralling, self-referencing
DNA of digression -
a staircase where there's really nothing to do

but pause and indulge your fantasy -
maybe that Nature Cruise of the Century
on the Bahia de Darwin...

*** (Title Poem) - final draft**

Maybe it was Burgundy, spilt
over the keyboard, when working late,

a fizzling short circuit that sparked
an asterisk with every carriage return

and made each line both a novelty
and frustration – the twin spiral

of its own footnote, the DNA
of double digression – a staircase

where there's really nothing to do
but pause on the landing, stalled

in a chapter of this or any other book,
and indulge your fantasy:

maybe that exclusive Galapagos cruise
aboard the Bahia de Darwin...

Comparative drafts were shared by other poets contributing to Poetry by Heart. Knowledge of a poem's history would seem of real value to the reader's grasp of the finished work.

*

A published collection leads to public events. A NAWE Conference reading was of special importance but so too was that at York University, where Jack Donovan was present – he who had interviewed me as a prospective student over thirty years before. Here was an invisible thread made palpable, and further living connectives materialized before my eyes: Patrick Wildgust, curator at Shandy Hall, and Ruth King, the potter to whom I had lent that faulty keyboard.

Every reading offers a new opportunity to extend this organic structure, with the character of each audience contributing – different, for instance, in the local library and the literary festival. In presenting *Asterisk* I use a slideshow bringing further photographs – and animations – into play. With the title poem, I let the text dissolve on screen as I read it, leaving only a spiralling trail of asterisks in its wake, but it seems to conjure a different reaction each time.

A reading at Bank Street Arts in Sheffield led to a further, more complex presentation in the form of an exhibition spanning two rooms.⁷⁴ Here was a chance to unpack the notes in three-dimensional, audio-visual space, and to emphasize the invitation to *participate*, to overwrite with one's own imaginings.⁷⁵ Poems such as "Coathooks", "Bookmarks" and other "multiples" are driven by this concept, as indeed is *Tristram Shandy*. The "list poem", that classic Creative Writing exercise, also features (mirroring Sterne's own fondness for lists), and there is a general "DIY" ethic at large, including a poem by that very name. At Bank Street, a table positioned in the corner of one room made an explicit invitation for visitors to sit and write.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ The publisher of *Asterisk* is based in the same building. The exhibition "*****" ran from 24 May to 15 June 2012.

⁷⁵ This key idea of "overwriting" is explored most explicitly in the poem "A Palimpsest".

⁷⁶ The invitation was reinforced by a quotation from Sterne, hung nearby: "The old man rose up to meet me, and with a respectful cordiality would have me sit down at the table [...] so I sat down at once like a son of the family". (Sterne 1768 in Jack and Parnell eds. 2003: 99)

This is the same spirit of NAWE's mission to bring other writers into the fold: *sharing the art, craft and imagination*.⁷⁷ For my own part, at the Ledbury Festival, 2012, I was first of all giving an *Asterisk* reading, afterwards running a public workshop on poetry and photography. As Sterne puts it:

For never do I hit upon any invention or device which tendeth to the furtherance of good writing, but I instantly make it public; willing that all mankind should write as well (as myself.) (Sterne op. cit.: 505)

At Ledbury, it seemed that *Asterisk* would forever be spawning new notes. Having heard the poem "Mind Your Head", the organizers requested a copy of the poem to be pinned above the exceptionally low doorway into the hospitality room. (Fig. 4) For the rest of the weekend I was in danger of knocking my head on my own poem.



Figure 4: "Mind Your Head", poem pinned above doorway, Ledbury, 2012.

⁷⁷ This phrase has been used extensively as a NAWE strapline and is the title of the history of NAWE published in *New Writing*. (Munden 2011a)

"Mind Your Head" is perhaps the most personal poem in the book, featuring my mother's death. It is interesting to note the similarity of this poem – in length and balance – to "Glacier", featuring the death of my father, in *Feeling the Pressure* (Munden ed. 2008: 11). Both my parents, Betty and Charles, are mentioned in the *Asterisk* notes with reference to 'The Black Page' exhibition at Shandy Hall, (Laurence Sterne Trust 2009) to which I contributed.⁷⁸ My black page (which was also exhibited at Bank Street) features the portcullis logo of Strong & Co. of Romsey Ltd., the brewery that employed my father all his working life, and where my mother worked too in her later years. The chains of the portcullis are strips of 8mm film, containing their home movies. The slogan "You're in the Strong Country" takes on the quality of an epitaph. (Fig. 5)



Figure 5: My contribution to 'The Black Page' exhibition, Shandy Hall 2009, now in a private collection.

The theme of death is embodied in the asterisk itself – not as used by Sterne, but in the reference I make (in the note to the title poem) to Kurt Vonnegut's *Galapagos* (1985), where "an asterisk (*) appears alongside a character's name when he or she is next in line for demise". (Munden 2011: 58)

⁷⁸ In 2009, 73 writers and artists were commissioned to interpret Sterne's famous representation of death (p73 of the original edition of *Tristram Shandy*) in their own way.

More generally, the asterisk acts as a pointer to digression or sheer fun. Sterne was sometimes called the "vicar of stars"⁷⁹ on account of his using asterisks to "bleep out" certain words. The playfulness perhaps offsets the perceived difficulty of Sterne – and by association poetry written on his territory. Part of the purpose of *Asterisk* – despite potential accusations of *difficulty* – is to catch the reader unaware, to slip poetry under the radar, in the guise of something else. The self-spawning, tail-chasing notes are a part of this, in cahoots with Shandy Hall, busy re-inventing itself as an international centre for narrative experiment, drawing schools and universities into the mix.

"Purpose" is perhaps an unusual word to apply to a book of poems, and it may be that my experience of commissioned work is here affecting my sense of poetic *stance*. Work for the British Council left me remarkably free to take a personal approach to public concerns, to the extent that I felt the boundaries between public and personal writing to be blurred. Perhaps, when faced with total freedom, I dreamt up an *invented commission*, a pseudo-guidebook promoting participative creativity.

I recall the late poet Pete Morgan commenting to me, somewhat bashfully, that he had ceased writing anything other than commissions.⁸⁰ I remember feeling something akin to envy, later replaced by sadness, eventually by admiration of his final, highly personal collection (2005), which demonstrates how his consummate craft – honed through application to a variety of briefs (including writing advertising copy) – could facilitate poetry of self-contained, emotional depth. Intriguingly, the book still sports on its cover the claim by Martin Booth for Pete to be considered "one of the best social poets writing in this country." (ibid.) Personal preoccupations can still be socially engaged.

Asterisk was not commissioned but it features a major commissioning project initiated by the Laurence Sterne Trust (2011), honouring the 250th anniversary of Sterne's greatest visual intervention in *Tristram Shandy* (Sterne op. cit.: 181), the marbled page – or "motly emblem of my work" as he calls it – which appears on page 169 of the original edition. 169 writers and artists were commissioned to create their own emblems and I was privileged to be one of them. My emblem was a photograph that appears in *Asterisk*, one that I took myself from an aeroplane window on my way to give a talk about the *Asterisk* project and

⁷⁹ According to the Shandy Hall curator, Patrick Wildgust, in conversation with the author.

⁸⁰ Pete Morgan's output as a "poet" included two television series, text for *The Yorkshire Ridings* (1987) with watercolours by John Tookey, and a guidebook to Sandringham.

Shandy Hall at an American conference⁸¹, amazed by how the ice floes on the sea made a marbling effect. (Fig. 6) The poem that goes with it, titled "**(Footnote)*", effectively chronicles the launch of the book some five years ahead of its publication. As an "emblem of my work" it captures, I hope, the boundary-breaking lines of connectivity that I view as fundamental to the poetic art.

There remains a crucial difference between commissioned poems and those that emerge through a more personal urgency (though sometimes poems inhabit the wrong camp, to interesting effect). I have been tempted, commercially, to pursue the possibility of further poetry/photography books that are based on houses such as Castle Howard and Shandy Hall. I don't rule it out, but there are certainly reasons to beware. *Henderskelfe* (Heaton and Munden 1989) demonstrates one of the problems, its language so deliberately constructed: it has a voice, certainly, but it smacks of the contrived. *Asterisk* emerged from an entirely different conceptual space, where autobiography could be thickly woven into philosophical and imaginative conceits. Even the wacky notes are at ease with themselves, the minutiae of personal experience rubbing shoulders with literary history and public events; an egalitarian set of information whispering in the wings.

⁸¹ The International Arts and Humanities Conference in Honolulu, Hawai'i, January 2006.

[I69]



Figure 6: My contribution to 'The Emblem of My Work' exhibition at Shandy Hall, 2011.

New Pond, Shandy Hall, February '11⁸²

A year-end deadline: you dig
like my father, marshalling parents
for the St Peter's pool.

*

Lala swim self, you insisted,
and leapt right in.

⁸² First published in *The North* 47 (Munden 2011a).

5: Beyond the Benchmark

As I write this chapter, my report of the same title, commissioned by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) is going to print. Ten years after the English Subject Centre's *Good Practice Guide* (Holland 2003) and five years after NAWE produced the first Creative Writing Subject Benchmark (NAWE 2008), the report investigates the state of the discipline today, and considers its future. "Good Practice" and "Benchmark" both refer to standards; "beyond" suggests the more exciting realms that can open up. This chapter relates to my less obviously "creative" public works, while bearing in mind that supporting creativity was of course their focus.

The initial objective was to reinforce the credibility of the subject within academia. A Benchmark for what is surely now an established discipline seems a very small thing but it was, at the time, a significant undertaking, not just the *writing* but pitching it to the subject community with confidence that it would be widely accepted. It still lacks the endorsement of the Quality and Assurance Agency (QAA) though the intention is to re-submit this year.

The QAA is keen to limit the overall number of Benchmarks, which makes it difficult for new ones to gain official status.⁸³ Arguments revolve around student numbers and overlap (e.g. with English). Creative Writing, however, is now studied as a Single Honours subject (and indeed in combination with many subjects other than English), and the number of students enrolled exceeds that of some subjects with an official Benchmark.

As the HEA report reveals, although many programmes find the NAWE Benchmark invaluable, others are unaware of it, some resist it, and at least one still views Creative Writing as subservient to English.⁸⁴ Does this suggest an insuperable awkwardness about the subject? I do not mean to cast Creative Writing as moody teenager, rather to return to my theme of writer as maverick, perpetually resisting the very idea of *expectations*. As Colum McCann (2013) states: "That's the beauty of being a writer – you continue to be reckless. You

⁸³ It is hard to follow the logic of this, since "new" areas of study do indeed emerge and need to be properly represented within the descriptions of "what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding or competence in the subject". (QAA 2013)

⁸⁴ *Beyond the Benchmark* (Munden 2013) anonymizes all comment. Ironically, that same university has been vociferous in support of the Creative Writing A Level, which has drawn heavily on the Benchmark.

can jump off the edge."⁸⁵

It was in that spirit of resistance that I struggled with the Benchmark myself. My input was in some ways banal, insistent that the document should use "plain English", not the convoluted language into which Creative Writing studies sometimes slips. There is a particular type of *writing about writing* that goes very wrong. As one respondent to my research states: "It's often badly written, pseudo-scientific, and can turn off the natural magic of language." (Munden 2013: 24) Similarly, Paul Mills (2010: 72) says: "If this kind of style is the price we have to pay [for institutionalizing Creative Writing] then it's not worth it." In its early draft, the NAWE Benchmark was in danger of falling foul of this tendency, "writing by committee" being notoriously difficult. My most significant contribution was to address that problem.

Calibrating the terms under which one works (and in this case, the terms under which others study) is informed by multiple perspectives. I had witnessed the resistance to learning journals, outcomes etc. when teaching adult education classes in the 1990s. I had then been shocked to hear at an AWP Conference⁸⁶ how writers in the US were outraged at being told their courses should have aims and objectives, this in a country where Creative Writing was supposedly so established. In subsequent years at AWP opinion became tempered, not least on account of research presented by Stephanie Vanderslice, an American writer-tutor who explained well the UK's adaptation to such requirements.⁸⁷

A further perspective was gained from conferences in Australia, where discussions are highly academic. My interventions, beginning in 2010, seemed to be unusual: I talked about NAWE's work outside higher education; I referred to my British Council engagements, contrasting this to the *expected* role of the conference delegate – delivering academic papers;⁸⁸ there seems to be some lack of clarity as to why writers of poems, novels and films should concern themselves with that. The NAWE conference, by contrast, revolves

⁸⁵ You can jump, fall, or be pushed, as Apollinaire fictitiously puts it in Christopher Logue's poem commonly misattributed to the Frenchman. See <http://www.emule.com/2poetry/phorum/read.php?4,34313,36775> [Accessed 22 October 2013].

⁸⁶ New Orleans, March 2002.

⁸⁷ *Rethinking Creative Writing* (Vanderslice 2011) represents a culmination of this research. The book is published by the Professional & Higher Partnership Ltd, with which NAWE is pleased to have set up a distribution arrangement.

⁸⁸ "Here There and Everywhere: The Writer and the Conference", a "non-paper" delivered at the 15th Annual AAWP Conference, "Strange Bedfellows of Perfect Partners", RMIT University, Melbourne, 27 November 2010.

predominantly around workshops, but are those any more appropriate? It is intriguing that well-established conferences for writers in the US, UK and Australia should all be so different. Most subjects converse internationally with relative ease: why should Creative Writing not follow suit?

In November 2012, I attended two back-to-back conferences in Australia and pitched my thinking on the above into three sessions discussing writing and its teaching, testing the personal reflections of my doctoral work within an international, academic lab.⁸⁹ If that sounds like traditional research practice, my approach in context felt anything but. I nevertheless believed it was appropriate to the topics, whatever the different expectations of my hosts. One presentation was on "revelation" in writing, another on "transgression", the third on "nurturing the elusive flame of creativity among the damp logs of craft and formula". There was mention in the programme (AAWP 2012) of "[the rights] we have as artists to annex and pervert": surely this gave me licence to subvert the traditional conference parameters. While many seemed to resist talking about their own practice (let alone details of their creative work or any personal experience that informed it), comfortable only when presenting things more theoretically, I took an opposite approach, putting myself on the line. How (so went the argument of this action research) can we expect bravery of our students if we are not prepared to take risks ourselves in presenting our subject? Perhaps my particular doctoral work – focusing on *self* to an unusual degree – was skewing my approach, but I pushed it to the limit; my comments on confessional poetry were truly *confessional*.

Future conferences will tell if my approach was effective, if others agree that the hallmarks of creativity are too often abandoned once the related procedures of teaching and conferencing come to the fore. Cheryl Moskowitz, at least, concurs:

I cannot think of any writer who would not acknowledge that there is some risk attached to the act of writing, yet when it comes to the teaching of writing we are perhaps a little less willing to admit to, examine or embrace the idea that risk-taking is part of our role. (2013: 51)

⁸⁹ The Bedell NonFictionNow Conference 2012 was held at RMIT University, Melbourne, 21-24 November, and was followed by the 17th Annual Conference of AAWP (the Association of Australasian Writing Programs) at Deakin University, Geelong.

The workshop – for so long the cornerstone of Creative Writing, and commended within the Benchmark – is one candidate for review,⁹⁰ but there is another Creative Writing "standard" that also needs scrutiny. The Benchmark put considerable emphasis on *re-drafting*, and re-drafting was an important part of that document's creation, but I need to risk reiterating here the vociferous opposition expressed by certain children's writers with a passion for developing children's own creativity.

I feel extremely distressed at the moment about watching some children being expected to re-draft on the grounds, the very spurious grounds, that that is what a real writer does... I hope this fashion for re-drafting will die out very fast because it's putting an awful lot of really bright, cheerful, happy children off English. (Fine 1996: vii)

In *Class Writing* I explore this in the context of researching the effectiveness of writers in schools:

Particular note was taken of 'the journey of the artefacts', the manner in which pupils improved a piece of writing over time. This is a somewhat contentious area. The imperative to 're-draft' has become a sort of mantra that often goes unquestioned but which many pupils struggle to understand, seeing it as 'having to write it all out again'. (Owen and Munden 2010: 65)

Philip Pullman is another eminent writer to have spoken out. At a conference at Keele University in 2005 he suggested that the best approach to Creative Writing in schools would be to ban it, thereby making it a desirable, rebellious activity. I understand that sentiment, but cannot go along with it. As Ben Knights (2006: 22) quotes me saying: "in the end it is an anti-education philosophy. Taken to its logical conclusion it gives up on the principle of making education relevant, stimulating, adventurous, or in any way creative."

How, then, might we preserve the essential principle of re-drafting without casting it as a tedious, conformist pursuit? In *Class Writing* (Owen and Munden

⁹⁰ See, for instance, *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?* (Donnelly 2010). At a recent conference at Lancaster University (Changing the Conversation: Artists' Practice in Participatory Settings, 2013), Helen Nicholson posed the concept of the "poetics of failure", a version of the mantra from Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho* (1983): "No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." That, perhaps, is also a mantra for the risk-taking workshop – that works.

2010: 66) I suggest "a set of activities: Adventuring; Expanding; Editing; Completing" as being nearer the mark. There's a balance here between *letting go* and *reining in*, a balance that curricula do well to reflect and one that we took seriously when devising a Creative Writing A Level.⁹¹

Previous evaluations of Creative Writing in schools had concentrated on issues such as motivation, confidence and self-esteem. Most still do. *Class Writing* was unique in attempting something different, and it wasn't without some difficulty and disappointment. Sue Horner's comment, printed on the back of the published report, is revealingly restrained:

This project suggests that a programme of visits by writers working with children can, with positive school co-operation, raise standards of writing and so is a worthwhile investment, especially given the concomitant increase in pupils' enjoyment and enthusiasm. (ibid.)

Here, as with other projects, the focus was on professional writers working in the classroom as an "enrichment" activity for the students involved. Some of the interventions were linked to curriculum work, but at no point did the writers view themselves as *delivering* that curriculum. That was anathema. When the National Curriculum was first introduced (in 1989) – just as NAWE was finding its feet as an organization – writers were "being brought in by rather desperate teachers as an antidote". (Munden 2006: 24) The National Curriculum was "deeply unpopular, not least with those teachers who valued their own 'maverick' tendencies." (Munden 2004a: 28) As Liz Cashdan (2002: 16) comments, students, when asked what constitutes good writing would answer: "Full stops, capital letters, sentences, adjectives." Over ten years on, many would attest to that chronic situation being largely unchanged. Contending with such a scenario, we should perhaps ask if "enrichment" is really a helpful concept.

⁹¹ An outline for a Creative Writing A Level was first drafted in 2006 by a NAWE group that included Adrian Beard, Jane Bluett, Maggie Butt, Graeme Harper, Richard Kerridge, Liz Fincham, Paul Munden, Paul Norgate, Rob Stannard and Cliff Yates. AB, JB, MB and PM subsequently developed the full specification with Katherine Clements at AQA, the qualification finally being accredited by Ofqual for introduction in September 2013. This was the culmination of twin movements within NAWE: the consolidation of Creative Writing in higher education, and the proven value of Creative Writing to students' development at earlier stages. In some respects, the introduction of a qualification was the last thing to have expected, especially at a time when the Secretary of State for Education was on a mission to review all qualifications and reinstate the primacy of exams (with which Creative Writing had never had any kind of relationship).

During the years 2001-7, despite my continuing belief in the value of writers' innate subversiveness, I became increasingly involved in a project⁹² with the authorities responsible for the Literacy Strategy that was so widely abhorred. The Poetry Society and Booktrust were partners too, "with the aim of ensuring that, during their time at school, every child encounters opportunities to work with professional writers who inspire them creatively." (Booktrust 2007: 2) Reflecting on that partnership and the decision to be involved, I do not think there was much choice. No one had the clout to fight the Strategy head on. The only path that made any sense was to fight from within, at the risk of alienating some NAWE members.

Contrary to what those members may have thought, we were aiming to secure a place for their ongoing work in schools by articulating its absolute relevance. The Strategy documents, uninspiring in their terminology, were nevertheless full of references to what writers are uniquely well equipped to deliver.⁹³

Another project partner was Arts Council England (ACE), which funded NAWE at the time. ACE staff in the Literature Department were deeply committed to the partnership and its aims, but another movement was afoot that was to dominate the landscape for artists in schools for a whole decade (before being abandoned). Creative Partnerships was set up by ACE in-house and then funded as if it were a client. It represented the most lavish expenditure on arts in schools that the country had ever known. Naturally, some marvellous projects took place⁹⁴, but less well acknowledged or documented is the clash with those already exploring how artists might best be deployed – not least in relation to the curriculum. Certain issues affected me directly, as I had to deal with members' complaints, and I feel they need to be documented here since they are nowhere else on record. Despite its riches (and the previous agreement between ACE, NAWE and other organizations that artists should be paid £250 per day), Creative Partnerships paid a daily rate of £170, refused (illegally) to pay VAT, turned down many reasonable travel expenses, and claimed copyright in any work that the artist and/or pupils produced. It was hardly surprising that a number of high-profile writers shunned its advances, and that writers

⁹² Writing Together was funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) with supplementary support from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA).

⁹³ These included "experiment with figurative language in conveying a sense of character and setting"; "experiment with presenting similar material in different forms and styles"; "develop an imaginative or unusual treatment of familiar material or established conventions". (Munden 2004a: 29)

⁹⁴ See *First Findings – a summary of policy, practice and progress: a review of creative learning 2002-2004* (Creative Partnerships 2005)

generally featured much less than other artists within its programme overall.

The ambition was grand but fundamentally flawed. Creative Partnerships set out to demonstrate "the importance of culture and creativity in education and how it can contribute to raising standards". (Creative Partnerships 2005: 4) I point to that last phrase in identifying one reason for the project's demise. Leaving aside the debate on what "standards" really mean, there is an error in claiming the high (extra-curricular) ground while also acting in subservience to the standards-driven curriculum that sits beyond one's grasp.⁹⁵ The issue here came clear to me at a recent meeting of those that manage projects in schools, one member stating that his ACE funding prohibited him from any direct involvement in statutory education. When ACE withdrew NAWE's funding in 2011, it put up a similarly spurious fence: it could not be seen to fund higher education.⁹⁶

Unshackled from the stipulations of a funding agreement, NAWE has been able to cut to the chase. While ACE has pursued its hands-tied mission through new regional agencies and the heavily funded experiment of Bridge organizations⁹⁷ taking over where Creative Partnerships left off, NAWE has helped Creative Writing to gain a proper foothold within schools by an altogether different, direct route: the accreditation of a Creative Writing A Level, being taught already now in some 250 schools.⁹⁸

A Levels are of course "beyond" the primary and secondary core programmes of study, but as Maggie Butt (2012: 2) says, the A Level "makes Creative Writing visible in the curriculum in the way that music, dance and art are visible." A trickle-down effect should follow, with teachers at other levels presented – at last – with a graspable sense of what Creative Writing is all about. And far from side-lining the role of visiting, professional writers, schools will now have a clear imperative to engage their services in a natural fit, undistorted by any subservience to literacy targets or mythical notions of entitlement or enrichment. The *beyond* now beckons.

⁹⁵ It should be said that NAWE was open to similar criticism for using statistics from the widely derided, "uncreative" SATs in evaluating the Class Writing project.

⁹⁶ This despite allocating funds to NAWE in previous years explicitly to run a Creative Writing HE network for all universities, staff and students.

⁹⁷ See <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/our-priorities-2011-15/children-and-young-people/bridge-organisations> [Accessed 22 October 2013].

⁹⁸ See <http://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/a-level/creative-writing-2750> [Accessed 22 October 2013].

The distinction I want to make is between the initiatives made on ideological grounds, by government, quangos, councils etc., and the plans devised by writers and artists themselves, sometimes challenging the institutional order within which they work. Thus did Malcolm Bradbury, with Ian McEwan as his MA (English) student, pave the way for over 500 Creative Writing courses in UK universities⁹⁹; thus did we set up our A Level stall in 2006, waiting for a matching vision to emerge within one of the Awarding Bodies. It is surely no accident that Katherine Clements, who championed our cause within AQA and worked so tirelessly to ensure that the qualification was introduced, is herself a novelist.

Unless you contend, as a writer yourself, with writing's essential tussle between "requirement" and "revolt", is it possible to articulate a curriculum that is true to the art? Having myself agonized over the re-drafting issue, I am in the end its advocate, not least because of my experience with *Asterisk* as described in Chapter 4. Its rational centrality within the A Level should dispense with students thinking of re-drafting as a chore, encouraging them to see it instead as a rewarding creative act in its own right.

In revisiting my various articles on writers in schools, it appears that I went into greatest detail for the benefit of audiences abroad, in the US and Slovakia. Each produced benefits in terms of lasting relationships with other national organizations and key personnel, but the Slovakian developments are the most compelling. As Viera Eliašová (2010: 14) reports, the British Council symposium in Bratislava, at which I presented NAWÉ's model of writers in schools, effectively "started the history of Creative Writing in Slovakia."

Not only English language teachers but also Slovak language teachers, teacher trainers and writers were involved in this phase. It addressed about 250 Slovak and 50 Central European English language teachers, 120 Slovak language and literature teachers and about 25 other foreign languages teachers. About 25,000 learners experienced the techniques of creative writing at all levels of education.

I feel humbled by these figures; humbled by the fact that such progress should have been made in Slovakia while we languished here with a sense of powerlessness in the face of a clinical obsession with attainment targets.

⁹⁹ The Bradbury/McEwan story is well chronicled in the introduction to *Class Work* (Bradbury 2005). The subsequent rise of Creative Writing in higher education is charted in *New Writing* (Munden 2011a: 220-224).

Perhaps, had I and other NAWE colleagues made a bigger play of our convictions on our own home stage, such marvels might have been achieved here too. Perhaps, and yet I suspect not. The various issues involved are different in every case. Here we had to wait for some crucial pieces of the jigsaw to emerge: we had to risk a relationship with curriculum; we had to see how the impact of writers in the classroom could be gauged; we had to articulate the flowering of Creative Writing in higher education; we had to put the Benchmark to the test, be clear about the true merits of re-drafting and teaching through workshops; we needed to establish a rapport with the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE); we even had to wait for the Arts Council to step back; and we had to wait for a creative co-conspirator to unlock the door from the inside. Thank you, Katherine.

Philip Pullman and others may be alarmed to know of a Creative Writing A Level being introduced. I respect such anxiety, knowing how insensitive systematization can be. I believe, though, that a close reading of the specification (AQA 2013) should dispel any fears. Coursework – or the writing portfolio, as we refer to it – figures large.¹⁰⁰ There are (as there have to be at A Level) exams, but they are closely aligned to the real undertakings of professional writers, reading and writing to deadlines for real reasons. That is not to say that we would not have avoided exams if we could, but in accepting a charge of pragmatism I would equally cite *compromise* as a genuine part of any writer's intellectual armoury.

I am particularly enthusiastic about the A Level's relevance to students whose other choices are essentially non-literary. I should like to think that poems in *Feeling the Pressure* (Munden ed. 2008) or others written in scientific contexts might be used as exemplary resources. During my own brief phase of working as a writer in schools, I used to refer to William Carlos Williams' (1944) comment that "a poem is a small (or large) machine made of words." I found it useful to take in some simple yet unexpected machines as props: an electric stapler with a see-through casing, letting you see the circuitry inside; an apple-coring device that looked more like a crown. I asked pupils to invent their own machines, made of words. They were immediately engaged by the idea, relishing the opportunity to be wildly imaginative while simultaneously grappling with the mechanics of language to make their vision a reality. It gave them the necessary

¹⁰⁰ Coursework, however much people seek to discredit it, undoubtedly offers the most extensive test of a student's knowledge and abilities; methods of handling it may be at fault, but not the principle.

structural domain in which to be creatively free. They liked, too, the idea of leaving the working parts on show.¹⁰¹

Constraint and freedom, rigour and flow, reining in and letting go, *benchmark* and *beyond*... It is relatively easy to position these seeming opposites as twin virtues of Creative Writing as both an art and an academic pursuit. Personal experience and more objective analysis form a further, creative tension. I have relied on the former, even when working on scientific themes, but my most recent British Council engagement – a conference on the role of cultural relations in addressing conflict¹⁰² – made me think again. Any personal trauma of my own was put into sharp perspective by the distressing (though sometimes uplifting) stories of suffering emerging from global conflicts. I needed a lower profile, greater humility, a sense of quiet. As the final poem puts it: "these fragments/ may not be much/ but their impact/ will equally cause/ little harm". (British Council 2010: 45) The poem "Counterpoint" (ibid.: 10) refers to the Red Cross venue for the event, where I found myself musing on the very nature of *organization*.

| | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>pas de signal</i> | underground |
| it reads onscreen | the immaculate index |
| above the panellists' heads | of handwritten cards |
| while they debate | still links the living |
| the virtue of systems | with the dead |

*

I mentioned a jigsaw. That was my final contribution to the NAWE Benchmark – the jigsaw cover chosen to reflect the way in which the Subject and Research Benchmark Statements dovetailed so precisely.¹⁰³ Finding representational images for writing activity is always a problem – the dreaded quill, pencil and nib still dominate – and a more abstract, metaphorical approach is often more productive. For me, a hands-on role in design and typesetting is also part of that

¹⁰¹ A favourite poem of mine, in relation to this, is "The Musical Cottage" by Philip Gross (1984: 19), in which a child "hinges the roof back on the whirr// and tick of cogs, precise machineries/ circling on themselves, clinched/ and slowing.

¹⁰² 'Act2', a Conference at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, Geneva, 20 September 2010.

¹⁰³ The cover features a detail from Painting 453 by my neighbour, David Platts, the cover image for this document.

productivity. From my own, early poem/image experiments, to my input on *Feeling the Pressure* and overall design of *Asterisk*, a close attention to visual presentation has been important to my approach. In preparing *Class Writing*, I designed and typeset as I wrote, hoping to grab attention with something other than the average report, treating the report, in fact, more like a poem.

Letting Go¹⁰⁴

I rolled up on a pink Harley Davidson;
fringed leather jacket and hair
half-way to my waist. No licence.
God only knows what you thought
I was trying to do. Your own daring
was more inspired, taking me
to the Church Hall Epiphany Tea.
You'd baked the cake. I sidled in,
embarrassed. You knew your friends
would accept me for what I was, your son.

*

The bursting clot in your brain
left you crumpling like a dummy
on to the kitchen floor. I never saw
your corpse. Everyone told me –
and I told myself – I should remember
you as before. Something held back
the questions I'd ask now.
Did you cry out? Were you hurt
as you fell? What broken teapot or cup
was prised from your stiffening grip?

*

Afterwards, I brought my love
of the moment into your empty house.
We drank, talked. She held me
at a distance, knowing my desire
to share a bed and knowing
it would have to be - *couldn't* be yours.
Here, in my own northern home, I dream
of that south coast scene; wanting
to enact what never happened; wanting
never to have imagined it at all.

¹⁰⁴ First published in the *First Verse Open Poetry Competition Anthology* (Munden 1992: 45); read at the Bedell NonFictioNow Conference 2012 at RMIT University, Melbourne.

Chapter 6: A Virtuous Circle

I began this study intending to trace how the various elements of my poetry and career were related. During the process it has become clear how poetry *is* my career, central to all my work, indeed my life. I have discovered reasons why the properties of poetry inform my other interests, my involvement with education, and the manner in which I have helped shape and maintain an organization to support poets, teachers and students – not to mention the generally curious – in exploring the world with words as their investigative tools.

I have been fortunate in gaining first-hand experience of relating poetry to matters of global importance, but retracing my steps has shown how fortune derives (in part at least) from a level of preparedness and determined positioning, and how the nature of that preparedness is closely allied to poetry itself; its "learned antennae"¹⁰⁵ the delicate sensors by which we brave new territory and find a way through.

I have explored three particular types of work: public commission, personal project, and resources designed to underpin subject development. None of this was done in isolation but the connections – and tensions – have here gained clarity, in a way that is already informing my approach to new projects – and my thoughts about the future development of NAWÉ.

Reflecting on my work within science-based projects, I realize that, despite my interest in the topics, it is not the relationship between science and poetry *per se* in which I am interested. It is, rather, the potential for poetry to assist in the discourse that fascinates me most. I am impressed, in essays on poetry and science edited by Robert Crawford (2006)¹⁰⁶, by statements about poetry's general power to help us inhabit the world.

I'm told there is an Inuit word, 'Inukshuk', which describes a construction of stones, one piled vertically on another and held there by snow. It means 'You can live here' [....] [I] look on a vast territory of subjects and hear a vast range

¹⁰⁵ The phrase is borrowed from John Davidson's poem "The Wasp" (Davidson 1973i: 179).

¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, Crawford refers to his book as a crossover project, going against "the present-day decorum of its academic publishing house by mixing specially commissioned verse with its prose."

of voices, including the media, literary theory, and science, and recognize that, as a poet, I can live here. (Herbert 2006: 87)

This represents a more relaxed attitude than that of my chameleon (in Chapter 1). Is a camouflaged jumpiness superseded after all? I think this is a matter of individual sensibility. The poet is not a generalized beast.

As I have shown, there are plentiful autobiographical elements in my poetry, even in the commissioned works. What it has taken me longer to realize is that poetry, however central to one's life, cannot reflect the life as a whole. I used to think that almost any interesting fragment of experience could become a poem, that by "amalgamating disparate experience" (Eliot 1932: 287) there was always a poem to be made.¹⁰⁷ (I fear this is a major trap into which poetry workshops still lure us, and I'll return to that issue.) Eliot himself puts this well:

Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality. (1932: 20)

Earlier in the same essay he remarks:

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. (ibid.: 17)

I do not go along with that "extinction". I believe poetry (including Eliot's) has personality at its core. Heaney puts it better:

I think that you've arrived as a poet when you can use an intonation that could be called public. [...] I think that the first voice I have is an inward musing, entranced at its best, but I would love to master a voice that could talk out as well as go into a trance. (in Haffenden 1981: 70)

Reflecting on my own work, I see where the personal voice is inadequate to the public task, and where a public stance denies the meaningfully personal. In the

¹⁰⁷ Certain poetic compendia, such as Berryman's *Dream Songs* (1969), still tempt me to think in these terms. *Asterisk* could still go that way.

case of the latter, I also see a tendency towards excessive irony, the hallmark of the dispassionate. This stanza is from "Commerce": (British Council 2003: 60)

This poem is happy
to take questions
so long as they are brief.
(It has another important
assignment, after lunch.)

and these from "Assurance": (ibid.: 30)

This poem has its foot
in the door. It wants
your informed consent
to its plans
for a world without risk.

[...]

With an actuary's handshake
and a counsellor's smile –
this poem confirms
your worst fear
that it means business.¹⁰⁸

There are elements of light-footedness here, but I am resistant now to the blatant personification of poetry. These poems seem to fall into yet another trap laid by some workshops and courses. They are, too much, poems about poetry.¹⁰⁹ I want poetry to *inhabit* a space, not muscle in; to be heard and to belong.¹¹⁰

I realize that my repeated reference to the poet as maverick – even as bandit or outlaw – poses a problem, suggesting that the poet is an exile, with nowhere to

¹⁰⁸ Both poems are printed in full in Appendix B.

¹⁰⁹ If, as Jonathan Culler states, "Poems, in their deployment of rhetorical operations, may be read as explorations in poetics" (1997: 81), it may also be the case that they are explorations in hermeneutics – sometimes too consciously so.

¹¹⁰ Kate Maguire (2012: 44) draws attention to how the German language captures this duality: "We have heard (gehort)," Heidegger says, "when we belong (gehoren) to what is said." (Bruns 1992: 157)

call home. This fits with the common view of poetry as self-marginalized, conflicting with my claim to its more central role. If, however, I now relate this to Bourdieu's theory of habitus, I see a resolution, for what are "transposable dispositions", and "analogical transfers" if not the poet's core strengths. It is perhaps the poet's outsider status that makes him/her the ultimate habitus hermeneut, "enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations".¹¹¹

I have nurtured my own outsider status, not least by addressing poetry in education from outside a formal teaching environment. I have the greatest respect for those who conduct debate and influence policy from within¹¹² but I also witness aspects of hermeneutic fatigue, writers who are literally too much *in situ* or worn down by bureaucracy to be effective facilitators.¹¹³ The outsider principle applies to NAWF too, perhaps better off without the conditions attached to Arts Council support.

To do *occasional* teaching is a privilege, largely unsystematized (and unjaded). It is invariably done with considerable preparation, on a mission to do something entirely different to what students might have encountered before. A defining principle of writers in schools, it is a disappearing trend in higher education where *visiting* lecturers, once characteristic of Creative Writing programmes, are an endangered species (despite the programmes viewing portfolio careers as the future norm for graduating students).

In putting forward my own curious career as a model, and having explored its *métissage* of influential threads, I see how the poet-entrepreneur is a *métis*, someone of mixed heritage,¹¹⁴ and it's a mixture of two maverick tendencies, each enriching and emboldening the other.

¹¹¹ See Bourdieu (1977). In an interview at Warwick University for *Beyond the Benchmark*, David Morley told me how, as a PhD science student, he had been able to communicate with perhaps six other people; as a writer he communicates with millions.

¹¹² A good example is Andrew Cowan's article, 'Questions, Questions' (Cowan 2007).

¹¹³ I am put in mind of Wordsworth as poet laureate, grinding to an imaginative halt; I think too of more recent "local" poet laureate positions, too much a matter of convenience, in terms of channelling public funds, with no real logic or relevance, too much *sited*, and with the added burden of an official title. The Poetry Society's "poetry places" scheme (Poetry Society 2000) was rather more interesting.

¹¹⁴ I think of Muldoon's imaginative *Mules* (1977), a whole collection of mixed marriages ("She had read one volume of Proust,/ He knew the cure for farcy") but also of the mud-bloods in Harry Potter, who are the bright sparks driving the story.

The virtuous circle involving innocence and experience is a means of refreshing a sense of risk. Too often, we talk of risk in terms of risk *assessment* that has become a form-filling ritual, establishing *acceptable* risk. Heaney (1979: 31) puts it into a starker reality:

The way we are living,
timorous or bold,
will have been our life.

Bold can be reckless; jumping off the edge, or even into the pool, can literally be fatal, but curiosity must be bold if anything innovative is to result. The following lines by Craig Raine (1983: 68) capture the knife-edge:

Is it fear
halting my child

so that her thumb,
withdrawn for a second,
smokes in the air?

Or fascination
like her father's?¹¹⁵

Mary Karr (2002: 122) remarks how "James Joyce once said that everyone starts out as a poet, then realizes it's too hard." Ken Robinson's "Decline of Genius" (referred to in Chapter 1) depicts then not just a failure of education but a loss of nerve by the child in fathering the man. I begin to suspect that the early loss of both my parents played no small part in my holding nerve.

I want to know how we hold our nerve as poets in education (or indeed in raising children). Francis Thompson, writing about Shelley almost a century ago (1914), states that:

An age that is ceasing to produce child-like children cannot produce a Shelley. For both as poet and a man he was essentially a child.

We, of this self-conscious, incredulous generation, sentimentalize our children, analyse our children, think we are endowed with a special capacity to

¹¹⁵ The father/child relationship here reflects Bourdieu's (1977) "matrix of perceptions".

sympathize and identify ourselves with children; we play at being children. And the result is that we are not more child-like, but our children are less child-like. It is so tiring to stoop to the child, so much easier to lift the child up to you. (in Pritchard 1929: 295)¹¹⁶

*

If we are serious about poetry's broad relevance, its ability to assist in any learning or edifying conversation, why are we so reticent about that when including it in the curriculum? The poetry channel should be broad and deep, to avoid what Wordsworth experienced.

I did not love,
As hath been noticed heretofore, the guise
Of our scholastic studies; could have wish'd
The river to have had an ampler range,
And freer pace;

(Wordsworth 1805 in Gill ed. 1970: 48)

When a Creative Writing A Level was first discussed, there was a serious suggestion to call it *Rhetoric*. My resistance to that at the time was intuitive; it was simply the wrong label for students in the noughties. Now, however, my arguments would be many. I have explored in this document something akin to "the growth of a poet's mind"¹¹⁷, and see how fundamental that story is to any development of Creative Writing as an art. I will champion that afresh in every quarter. Otherwise poetry becomes what Yeats called "noetry", "full of intellectual faculty" but "lacking in imaginative impulse".¹¹⁸

Michael Horowitz (2008) mentions how Adrian Mitchell refused to allow any of his poetry to be used in examinations. "I think that tests and exams dominate

¹¹⁶ I smile to find an inscription inside this volume of *Great Essays of All Nations* from my godfather to my father on his 21st birthday, 1932.

¹¹⁷ This is part of the title given posthumously to Wordsworth's revised edition of his autobiographical work, *The Prelude*, originally conceived as a poem called "The Recluse, or Views on Man, Nature, and Society". (Gill ed. 1970) Coleridge, in a combative response to Wordsworth's preface to their *Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1805 in Roper ed. 1976), conceived of a "treatise on aesthetics" that he eventually transposed into "an autobiographical frame" in *Biographia Literaria*. (Watson ed. 1977: xi)

¹¹⁸ Yeats' remark appears in the *Bookman*, September 1892, cited in Herbert (2006: 74).

education and squash it. They're an educational experiment that has failed dismally". I can understand the sentiment but would be pleased for my work to be used in such a way. If poetry is to exist as an enlivening force within education, then the poet has a responsibility to influence how that works.

There is though a real problem inherent in defining Creative Writing as a curriculum subject (and NAWÉ as Subject Association) when my belief is in an interdisciplinary education. Nevertheless, if the subject is invisible, it will play no part. Gove suggests that teachers should be members of appropriate Subject Associations. I believe that we should therefore seek NAWÉ members amongst those teaching the new A Level, and from there proceed to persuade a larger cohort of Creative Writing's widespread relevance.

Gove has put "Romantic Poetry" on the new GCSE English syllabus to be taught from 2015, the cause of much controversy. His decree has been presented without any specific logic but perhaps we should find subversive logic of our own. The Romantics are poets who pushed themselves, their rebellion underpinned by intense critical reflection; and Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley, as Muldoon (2006: 182) points out, are all "poets inclined to take a public, political position, unabashedly 'telling off' a king". Why not recruit such past master-mavericks to our cause? Thereby we might, with Gove as unwitting accomplice, pursue Keats' great vision:

Many have original minds who may not think it [...] every human might become great, and Humanity instead of being a wide heath of Furze and Briars with here and there a remote Oak or Pine, would become a grand democracy of Forest Trees. (in Gittings ed. 1970: 66)

*

I have wandered here extensively, and while I recognize the risk, I hope the *Asterisk* chapter demonstrates why "not all those who wander are lost".¹¹⁹ I needed to find those connective moments in my own history that have underwritten my intuitive navigation ever since. I do not necessarily wish as Goethe did "to spare the young those circuitous paths on which he himself had

¹¹⁹ This is a line from the poem "All that is gold does not glitter" in Chapter 10 of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Tolkien 1954).

lost his way".¹²⁰ Circuitous paths are invaluable. Part of NAWE's mission, however, is to provide the assistance that writers need to forge ahead in what Henry Van Dyke (in Pritchard 1929: 922) calls "The Pathless Profession". As this study shows, there is no easy solution, no sat nav; we need to present new maps in their full complexity, and give guidance on how to read them.¹²¹

I have made here some new, informative digressions. Hermeneutics has led me to Translation Studies, the challenges of poetry translation enriching my understanding of poetry's interpretative function. In advocating the importance of Creative Writing in education, I am tempted to think that translation should take greater prominence. It would underline the interdisciplinary nature of the whole. Translation, as Edith Grossman (2010: 13) states, "is crucial to our sense of ourselves as serious readers", and Creative Writing is founded on the principle of serious reading. Translation, like rewriting, addresses issues mentioned above: the workshop's call to instant, automatic inspiration, and the potential slide into metapoetry's hall of mirrors.

I referred in the preceding chapter to the "machine made of words", and while I still find that a compelling concept, I also want to question it. While we look with childlike wonder into the workings of Philip Gross's musical cottage, (1984: 19) or consider Don Paterson's suggestion that "The poem is a little mechanism for remembering itself" (1999: xiv), we should remember that the mechanism is not all. I worry that some well-meaning poetry teaching, anxious to kick-start a poem in everyone, in search of Keats' artistic democracy, promotes a mechanized simplicity. As Greenhall (2006: 73) says of translation: "Nowhere [...] does it fail so miserably as when humans try to automate the process." It can be mind-expanding fun to play with an automatic metaphor generator (or even an online translating tool) but we need to be clear that these Creative Writing games do not equate with the real thing, and even the very best workshop techniques can become formulaic.

I want to raise the cry for writers in the classroom, not poetry toolkits, and for writers to have a self-renewing approach to their work, not to lapse into being

¹²⁰ The line is from his Introduction to *Die Proyläen*, quoted by Coleridge at the start of *Biographia Literaria*. (1817 in Watson ed. 1977: xxvi)

¹²¹ NAWE's commissioned series of "How did I get here?" articles form a useful base. See The Writer's Compass section of the NAWE website, specifically <http://www.nawe.co.uk/the-writers-compass/career-stories.html> [Accessed 22 October 2013].

tired, one-trick ponies. I am similarly wary of toolkits for professional development, and "top tips" masquerading as teaching/learning.

In taking stock of my own writing/learning, I see that I have relentlessly shunned the workshop in favour of "real world" practical writing opportunities – the hidden bulk of ice beneath the bergs of my public works. I believe that approach may be useful to others, a way of countering the workshop-junkie syndrome by working on other things (articles, reviews, synopses), all of which are driven by wide reading, too often the wannabe poet's area of neglect.

The broad portfolio also counters a drift into the margins, or the potential fallacy of considering oneself a poetry *expert* – surely an oxymoron, at odds with the principle of "un-knowing": in the hands of poetry experts, all poems would be the same; machines in the worst sense.

I am in danger here of promoting an alternative simplicity that is based on *passion*. I find it fascinating that this study should have taken me to the opposite of what Paulin (1986: 45) terms "the Arnoldian doctrine of the balanced 'disinterested' imagination" but a poem cannot be unengaged. It is, after all,

*A protest, invaluable to science itself,
Against the exclusion of value
From the essence of matter of fact.*

(MacDiarmid 1992: 217)

I see a need to articulate further the crucial interface between discipline/practice and expressive force, a place where curriculum minders and artists can form a truce.¹²²

When Muldoon says that he can feel himself becoming "a sort of a poetry machine", he qualifies that as follows:

Of course you are not merely a machine. One's own DNA matters because the poem has been through a particular personality. The best poems come from the world, go through the poet and go back in to the world. (Guardian 2007)

¹²² In the same way, Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009: 9), "drawn to the art of creative writing as a subversive praxis", comment that "Metissage offers a *rapprochement* between alternative and mainstream curriculum discourses".

I want to see the personality, not the poetry machine, assert itself on all fronts: in the book, in the classroom, on the conference stage. I do not mean personality in the self-proclaiming celebrity sense, but as the dynamo driving the hermeneutic craft, with empathy replacing irony as fuel. The following poem contrasts with those quoted earlier in the chapter.

Missing¹²³

you make his bed
and long for the need
to practise this
day by day
into an art

Barsham (2011: 62) suggests that "a writer's life mysteriously activates the conditions best suited to release the work." This is every bit as true of Eliot the bank clerk as for Keats or Wilfred Owen, and it relates to me too.

My supervisor at York noted my poetry's theme of survival. I register that more now, noting the influence of early bereavement. A strong interest in the natural world and a growing concern with environmental issues has also played a part, but it is clear how poetry, for me, has not only been a way of making sense of the world but also progressing through it – pursuing the poetry *business* – which has in turn nourished my own creative work. Within the virtuous circle, this is related to the survival of poetry itself, as something that is taught in schools, encountered in unexpected, rewarding contexts, and practised as a democratic art.

David Herd (2000: 18) remarks how "Habermas [1984: 10] explains his notion of 'cognitive instrumental rationality' as 'successful self-maintenance made possible by informed disposition over, and intelligent adaptation to, conditions of a contingent environment'. This is more familiar for the reader of American writing, intelligent adaptation to a contingent environment being the way of the frontier hero".

This wild-west scenario is somewhere the poet-outlaw – or even poet-lawman – should feel right at home.

¹²³ From *Act 2* (British Council 2010: 30).

The work I have done in helping prepare writers for work in education has drawn on my own experience of the "deep end" (or "frontier") and my developing understanding of poetry's essential, educative qualities. It is an ongoing challenge to enable such learning to inform the more systemized schemes proposed. There is, at this moment, a Level 3 qualification being introduced for artists working with children and young people that goes against the grain of everything I have learnt.¹²⁴ (It even contradicts the principle of artists working *with teachers*, not being left in sole charge.) It is tempting to hope that the initiative will die, but such naïve optimism can be dangerous. NAWÉ needs to be active on these matters and I feel more strongly about that as a result of this study. Those who care should not allow themselves to be sidelined but argue vociferously against the crass.

NAWE's first residential conference, in 2007, was titled "The Way Ahead: the future of Creative Writing in Education." We followed that futurism with "Reporting Back", thereby articulating the virtuous circle in organizational terms. Within "The Practice Room" of the discipline, we are not only polishing familiar material with improving skills, we are constantly encountering the new, rehearsing new theories and new arguments. My own practice informs my directorial role, and the evolution of the organization has been intertwined with my own.¹²⁵ This has, to date, been played to advantage (and there was surely never a deeper end for an organization to encounter than the total funding cut I helped NAWÉ to brave out), but there are problems in terms of future trajectory. At some stage there needs to be a loosening of this particular métissage.

There is, in any case, a danger in over-prolonged leadership, too big a monocultural influence. NAWÉ may have thrived with an entrepreneurial spirit, but it is not a sole-trader. There is an issue here too around voice. Developing a personal voice as a writer is entirely different to giving voice to an organization. I can recognize my own reticence on the latter front, and see how a different type of political sensibility might prove more effective. There is a crucial difference between the poet's subtle cradling of information (be that a matter of personal emotion, scientific discovery or public conscience) and the forthright advocacy required elsewhere.

¹²⁴ See <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/our-priorities-2011-15/children-and-young-people/new-qualifications-creative-practitioners/> [Accessed 22 October 2013].

¹²⁵ See my personal history of NAWÉ (Munden 2011a: 220-224).

Meanwhile, however, I feel better equipped to contribute to various debates, notably those about theory and practice-led PhDs; my understanding of doctoral work (and supervision) is itself an important gain. I should like to investigate further the claim (of my own publisher) that the quality of certain poets' work has diminished after their doctoral studies.

I have also identified a number of new targets. Reflecting on NAWE's limited support for teachers, I feel determined to capitalize on the current opportunity to produce resources for the new A Level. The NAWE magazine needs to evolve: AWP's marketing of *The Writer's Chronicle* on nationwide newsstands is perhaps beyond our reach, but is something to consider. I should like to engage more with national and international debate, perhaps by delegating more of the mundane, hands-on tasks of which I am probably too fond. The DIY ethic, in the end, has its limits¹²⁶ and may even be a barrier to succession planning.

This is not to unravel the symbiotic nature of professional roles. I hope my experience of *Asterisk* will be valuable to a new project placing writers in museums, and that my medical conferencing will inform one on arts in health and social care. I also believe that the growth of the digital realm is opening up extraordinary new opportunities for writers as multi-professionals, something that my own experience should help NAWE to support.

Some new projects with which I am involved, such as the international journal, *Meniscus*,¹²⁷ and the commercial short story publishing venture, Cut a Long Story,¹²⁸ have NAWE associations but my role in them is personal. This represents yet another type of entrepreneurialism, beneficial both to NAWE and me personally, in different ways.

*

At a reading at York University in July 2013, the late Seamus Heaney commented that he wished he had given more time to his own work. It is a fascinating remark from someone whom we might presume to have led the

¹²⁶ It is nevertheless interesting to note David Morley (interviewed by the author, July 2012) still upholding something similar in higher education, the Creative Writing lecturer happily involved in all aspects of delivering the programme.

¹²⁷ *Meniscus* is an online, free access literary journal published by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP). <http://www.meniscus.org.au/> [Accessed 22 October 2013].

¹²⁸ See <http://www.cutalongstory.com> [Accessed 22 October 2013].

perfect freelance life. The big, financial rewards perhaps came late, even then leading him into a demanding round of public work. It has certainly made me think afresh about my own balance, and how the most cherished projects can be ignored for too long. It is beyond the scope of this document to detail my latest plans, but it is important at least to indicate how my approach to them is changing.

Firstly, The Poetry Channel wins my personal ratings war. My Kennedy book (working title *Amplified*) will not be a conventional biographical study, but a collection of mini essays interspersed with poems.¹²⁹ I realize this is driven in part by my desire to make poems emerge in camouflage, like the chameleon, attempting to slip past the reader's resistance. (I once had an idea to put poetry on beer mats; maybe that too is a project to re-explore.¹³⁰)

Nigel Kennedy hardly needs a wider audience or any maverick PR other than his own. His achievement nevertheless calls for interpreting (not least for a certain coterie of classical purists¹³¹). I am naturally fascinated by his own role as interpreter (of Vivaldi, etc.) and someone who has spoken out against traditional education, benefiting from more maverick educative experiences (e.g. with Stephane Grappelli).

Secondly, in preparing a volume of New and Selected Poems, I find it instructive to consider Muldoon and Eliot's comments on how "original" work can undergo a change – either through translation or through the arrival of the new. Each of the *transitoires* is a case in point. My working title, *Analogue/Digital*, reflects my interest in the current shift from analogue to digital technology, and the associated obsolescence of recording devices, a fate from which poetry must surely escape. (Survival, it would seem, is again a core theme, reinterpreted.) The challenges of selection, however, are considerable. How, for instance, is a coherent personal voice to be represented when it ranges from schoolboy "mnemonics" to the international post-conflict conference – and beyond?

¹²⁹ I am pleased to have subverted my original plan, though there are precedents: I have long admired the way Paul Hyland uses poems to preface the chapters of his topographical works on the Purbecks (1978) and the Isle of Wight (1984).

¹³⁰ The "mate in the pub" voice is an interesting ploy of some contemporary poetry, a form of what Althusser (1968) refers to as *hailing* or *interpellation* (in Rivkin and Ryan 2004: 699), a means of coercing an involved response.

¹³¹ Kennedy's popular image outraged John Drummond, former Controller of BBC Radio 3 and the Proms, who famously criticized the violinist in 1991 as being a Liberace for the Nineties. (Gunnell 1999)

Thirdly, I see potential new futures for abandoned or unresolved works, and recall Hughes' comment about Plath: "if she couldn't get a table out of the material, she was quite happy to get a chair, or even a toy." (in Plath 1981: 13) Having once written a film script on the life of Sam Peckinpah, it occurs to me how that might be translated into poetry, just as Hughes did with *Gaudete* (1977), although there might be other options. After the best part of twenty years going our separate ways, Kit Monkman and I are working on a film, scripting *Macbeth* for a radically new filmic treatment¹³² before tackling an original screenplay based around memory and photography, so the Peckinpah script might yet head for the screen. Kit has asked if my "Kubrick" synopses might also provide useful material.¹³³

Turning table into chair harks back to DIY. Simon Armitage (2006: 121) describes how a friend's new MG has no visible engine, just a phone number in case of emergency. "Keep up with the warranty payments and don't meddle—that seems to be the message." I side wholeheartedly with Armitage in seeing poetry as something that opposes that trend, enabling us to have a hands-on relationship with whatever we encounter. Is this the "professional English cult of the amateur" (Paulin 1986: 46) all over again? Perhaps, but engagement – or curiosity – is the principle focus, rather than expertise in mechanics or whatever else. This may, for some, mean no more than an informed conversation with the rescue service representative with his head under the bonnet; it is still worth having.

But in wanting a hands-on relationship with the world, are poets merely *meddlers*? Are we, with our passion, our un-thinking, *anarchists*?

It is of course in the nature of words to run around loose – we are never really able to pin them down – but poetry seems to institute this ambiguity or misrule, as if poetry were some sort of antiprinciple principle, or as if there were some internal or even metaphysical link between poetry and anarchy, say, of the sort Antonin Artaud imagined when he said that whenever "the poetic spirit is exercised, it always moves toward a kind of seething anarchy, a total breakdown of reality by poetry. (Bruns 1992: 230)

¹³² Kit Monkman's first feature-length film, *The Knife that Killed Me*, is scheduled for release in late 2013.

¹³³ Kubrick's own long-cherished project on Napoleon is to be realized as a TV mini-series by Spielberg. See Biswell (2013).

This may sound enticing, but as lords of misrule we may too easily be ignored. If you are Nigel Kennedy, exploring the outer regions of genius on the world stage, you may have a willing audience and get away with it (though his performances of Monti's *Csárdás* as an encore test this to the limit).¹³⁴ How often do poets have a captive audience and the nerve to take such risk? There is irony that so-called rebels should be so reserved. On certain stages, however, and of course in the *classroom*, as master or apprentice, *discipline* (in its mixed meanings) is inevitably the order of the day. If we go "beyond", we need to show that the benchmark is still in view.

*

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

(Eliot 1969: 197)

Revisiting Winchester, I walked past the timber-framed building in the cathedral close and peered into my old practice room window. It looked much the same as it did over forty years ago. I wandered across the school playground and in through the low doorway, past the practice room and up the stairs to where I was taught History – or rather, where I sat entranced by the stories of the History teacher who had once been the horse-riding double for Richard Greene as Robin Hood in the 1960s television show. Here, everything was different: banks of electric keyboards were ranged around the room, and I imagined the excitement of inhabiting such a space as a pupil now. Further along, in the room where the choir still rehearses every day, I found a new set of robes, very Harry Potter. It was all a heady blend of continuity and change.

¹³⁴ I witnessed one where his musical digression went as far as it is possible to imagine. It seemed as if he was determined to stretch the music beyond what any conventional sense of structure could contain, and there was a moment I thought he had gone too far, that the music would break, that he would lose his audience completely. The performance was with Kroke, part of a Polish Weekend that Kennedy curated at the Southbank Centre, 29–31 May 2010. Kennedy himself played in 8 of the 13 concerts within 3 days, and the late-night jazz sessions clearly ran into further dionysian exploits.

I find it heartening to see the brave little outlaw in me still tenacious, if now informed by new interests and awareness. I know now that the bandit's mask has its relevance – and worth.

Reflexivity, naturally, comes at a price, especially for anyone self-employed. With no sabbatical, I risk spending too much time away from the administrative side of the poetry business, the part that pays the rent. I nevertheless believe that we should highlight the dividends and keep the virtuous circle in spin.

Reflecting on my earlier comment (in Chapter 1) about "knowing the pieces too well", I see it overturned, the refute coming from Kennedy (2006), playing Bach:

We know the music well enough now to let ourselves go. There's got to be [...] an element of not trying to control everything but letting the vibe take control, letting the spirit of the music take control.

Maverick he may be, but Kennedy practices Bach every day. It is hard work being an effective rebel. Perhaps his most significant *crossover* contribution is not between jazz and classical music but discipline and subversion. I dare anyone to call this particular *métissage* *dumbing down*.¹³⁵

This sense of *metanoia*, discovering something beyond the knowing, was evident within the Poetry by Heart project in 2013. Those involved bore witness to the further realms to which they gained access, over the years, once the initial task of *knowing* the poem was surpassed.¹³⁶ The success story of this project is a promising sign of how poetry may yet (re)gain a less marginalized place in both education and society. Poetry publishing may be in the doldrums but the art itself gains headlines. Poetry hails those that want to be stimulated to think differently,¹³⁷ the curious, those who want to know how the *Four Seasons* vary each year, free of their digitized "call on hold" repetition.

¹³⁵ This was the phrase used by John Drummond at the Edinburgh Book Festival (13 August 2000) in his attack on New Labour's policy of "access over excellence". Relating to this period, and according to Bookseller Publications, 2,496 poetry titles were published during 1998, compared with just 975 in 1990. (Gunnell 1999)

¹³⁶ My own account of this appears in the Oxford Dictionaries blog <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2013/05/the-old-masters> [Accessed 22 October 2013]. Poetry by Heart has now received £1 million funding from the Department of Education for a further 2 years.

¹³⁷ Warren S. Warren describes an experiment at Princeton in which a Muldoon poem produces a "more intense pattern of brain activity" than results from reading

Research can be bewildering in its serendipity. It is, perhaps, the ultimate endorsement of digression. I am listening now to Kennedy's latest rendition of *The Four Seasons* at the Proms, where Summer segues into joyous Duke Ellington: "It don't mean a thing/ If it ain't got that swing". The logic is flawless yet still startling, and the thrill increases as I read – while I listen – Edith Grossman (in *Why Translation Matters*) referring to that same lyric as "an insight that holds as true in poetry as it does in jazz". (2010: 97) Kennedy concludes his concert by praising his young Palestinian orchestra. He makes a comment about apartheid that the BBC will subsequently cut from the television broadcast, and I am back in the realm of politics and art. Persistent preoccupations mix with recent discoveries, and all my notes and fragments feel freshly charged with a new imperative.

Culler (1997: 61) points out that "hermeneutic models come from the fields of law and religion, where people seek to interpret an authoritative legal or sacred text in order to decide how to act." The idea of acting on poetry is not a familiar one, despite Shelley's affirmation that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (1840 in Eliot ed. 1910: 377), and as Geoffrey Hill says: "Poetry is [...] a form of responsible behaviour, not a directive." (in Haffenden 1981: 99) Perhaps, though, that *is* poetry's directive: to become involved in the responsibility.¹³⁸ Those who sideline poetry are perhaps no different to those who talk of "environmentalists" as social outcasts rather than people who inhabit their environment with a duty of care.

If, as Shelley argues, poets are "mirrors of the gigantic shadows that futurity casts upon the present" (op. cit.: 377), then he would surely see the need now for poetry activism. Iris Murdoch (1961: 18) states that:

we moderns have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary. We no longer use a spread-out substantial picture of the manifold virtues of man and society. We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world.

"bureaucratic prose". (Crawford 2006: 167-168). "Think different", a slogan that eschews the adverb in favour of difference, was one of Apple's highly successful slogans.

¹³⁸ Shelley's further comments bridge the distinction here. He states that "poets [...] are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society". (op. cit.: 348)

I think Murdoch here is yearning for more humility. And while I may have raised a call to arms, for more boldness, more passion, and a crusading role for poetry in multiple arenas, I am aware there is a benefit in remaining low key, being wary of polemic and shunning the media's clamour for *loud*.¹³⁹ Poetry may need its own "brave naked will", but a poet also needs a sense of humility in the face of unimaginable horizons, an admission that there is life beyond even the most virtuous of circles; a sense of beyond the beyond.

¹³⁹ It is interesting to see Susan Cain's book, *Quiet: the power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking* (2012), gain such popularity and acclaim.

One to a Hundred¹⁴⁰

The Pale Rider and his gang drift off
into the woods and I'm left alone,
flat on my back, staring up
through the trees with my right hand flopped
sideways still holding the Colt 45.

The high-noon sun's so strong
I opt for the eyes-shut approach
but can't decide whether to keep my body stiff
or to relax. I fear the sound of my own heart-beat
will give me away.

The silence stretches out. I'm beginning
to lose count and rather enjoy it
when a different sense of unease
creeps over me. What if they've left me
for good? What if they're changing the rules
or inventing a whole new game?

25,127 words

¹⁴⁰ Unpublished, but proposed for *Analogue/Digital: New and Selected Poems* planned by Smith/Doorstop for 2014.

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CDs, DVDs

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Nigel Kennedy Quintet (2008) *A Very Nice Album*, CD. London: EMI.

Stephen Duffy (2004) *Music in colours*, CD. London: EMI.

Appendix A: Mastermind script from The Poetry Channel

And now for tonight's intellectual challenge: the return of the ever-popular
MASTERMIND (script: Paul Munden) *Smugnus Smugnusson is indisposed, but tonight Jeremy Axeman puts the only contender through his paces.*

AXE: Our first and only contestant tonight is Paul Munden, poet, from... well, we only have a cyberspace address - paul@nawe.co.uk - but we believe that may be somewhere in North Yorkshire. His specialist subject is General Knowledge, which seems a bit of a cheat to me, but he claims that Poetry embraces everything. So, Mr Munden, here are your questions, starting from...now. Which poet once defined poetry as 'a machine made of words'?
POET: William Carlos Williams

AXE: Correct. Which poet once said that he like poems 'with their laces tied up'?

POET: Peter Porter. But of course some poems wear wellies or flip flops...

AXE: Thank you Mr Munden. Correct. But don't push your luck. Port Regis classes are organised alphabetically. Which ages are represented by class CM?

POET: Oh no, I never could get this straight...

AXE: Correct. Cyberpets, sometimes known as Tamogotchis, are banned from the classroom. How do you explain your decision to introduce no less than 10 virtual pets into form FS on the morning of October 7th?

POET: Poetic licence.

AXE: What sort of answer is that?

POET: These pets were poems...

AXE: Pets nevertheless. Furthermore, you encouraged the children to care about these creatures...

POET: Don't you want them to care?

AXE: Who's asking the questions here?!

POET: Pass.

AXE: *(quietly fuming)* Is it true that you stopped pupils using a Thesaurus (sometimes referred to at Port Regis as a Theosaurus)?

POET: *(mumbles)*

AXE: I beg your pardon?

POET: Tamogotchis are one thing A dinosaur in the classroom is quite another matter.

AXE: Dinosaur?!

POET: The Theosaurus. I wanted everyone to find words for themselves, not rely on a cumbersome, old-fashioned, dim-witted beast if ever there was one...

AXE: Mr Munden, a simple answer will do. DON'T WASTE WORDS! You seem to encourage eco-friendly poems, and yet it is estimated that some 500 sheets of paper were used during your two day visit. Can you justify this?

POET: It could have been worse. The poems were then put onto a computer and the subsequent redrafting conducted over the Internet. Without Cyberspace, we'd have used up many more trees.

AXE: OK OK. I'll get you with this one. The poet W H Auden said that Poetry makes nothing happen. He was right, wasn't he?!

POET: On the contrary. Take a look around you. Poetry has brought all these people together, it's making them laugh, making them cry, it's making them think. (to the audience) Three cheers for Poetry! Hip hip - HOORAY etc.

(AXE throws up his papers in despair and walks off.)

Appendix B: Poems cited that are not included in the principle public works

Mnemonics

The Practice Room

from *Poetry Introduction 7* (Munden 1990)

Home Movies

from *Illuminations* (Munden 1992)

Precision

Commerce

Assurance

from *Conflicts of Interest* (British Council 2003)

Found in Translation

Tools of the Trade

Rules of Armed Combat

from *Not for Sale* (British Council 2004)

Mnemonics

Chapel. Given free bibles by some God Squad freaks.
No haircut but History prep foul. Life-saving a shag.
Stutchbury will almost definitely swop the stamps.

*

Orchestra not bad but we know the pieces too well.
Started to hatch brine shrimps which I don't think
will work. Sixth in triple jump though nearly second.

*

Painted an old ammunition box to keep my stamps in.
Captain Noah. If only I could sing in a deep voice
like the others. Skived. No bath as they were full.

*

English. Essay on aftermath of atomic explosion.
Wrote eight pages! I think I might make it the end
of a book I might write. Electrified my violin.

*

Charted the evolution of life, then table tennis.
It seems Finding has half cut his arm off, so
our entry in the Music Comp is slightly up creek.

*

Looked for stamp hinges but found other things
instead. Captain Noah. I don't want to do a woman.
Thai might be going back to Vietnam next term.

*

The brine shrimps have hatched! Hot dogs and cider
after the concert. Broke milk bottles for a laugh.
History revision. Mr Penny is a swine. Wrote diary.

The Practice Room

His voice was a stony bass, rinsed
with meths. One side of his cassock
sagged with the tell-tale bottle's weight
and when he leaned across to turn
the page, I was jabbed by the smell.

His hands were yellow ivory, his fingers
exacting hammers. In the dingy practice room
he taught me Hindemith but my progress
was slow, still is. I explained
how I had to divide my time with the violin

at which he took my hands
and felt the flexible knuckles revolve
in their oil. I try it myself now
and it just won't work.

*

The room became her Victorian parlour.
She came and went like a ghost,
her grey hair a frizzed silhouette
against the window, beyond which
other boys played cricket in the yard.

She believed in letting the bow ride free.
Before, you had to hold – and later imagine –
a book under the arm. All this
she said in a whispering vibrato
that seemed to brush my skin.

It's been a long time. My violin slides out
from a silk scarf. We uncork the wine.
The piano gives an A for me to crank
the stiff pegs up to the mark.

Home Movies

The slice of oak announcing where we lived
is a clapperboard. What's left of childhood
other than the disconnected moments
when a camera was at wobbly hand?

A car

is always pulling up and guests pile out
in a relentless whirl. Thinking about it,
they must have reversed then driven in
once more when we were ready to film.
I'm dressed as Robin Hood – and, OK,
still keen on a feather in my cap
but I wouldn't be seen dead
in those green tights. The bow-
string is simply string, slackening
after every few shots. I run forward
to pick up my arrow which falls just short
of the target and again, run forward
to pick up my arrow which falls just short.
The target is whitewashed chipboard on which
Dad has painted bright concentric circles
focusing on a scarlet bull.

*

It's all there, wound up in my head.
Composition: *Holidays*. Now it clicks
through the projector's gate.

*This Easter I packed up
our family house,
sorting the years
of garage junk,
hauling whole suitcases
down to the bonfire.
Dad didn't move
from his bed.*

*Mum was with him
except when his pain
got to her nerves.
The vicar was called.
We gathered round
while he said a prayer
and I went rigid
as Dad's eyes opened
in panic believing
this was it.
He hung on for days
after that.
I was holding his hand
when suddenly I knew
he wasn't there.*

*

Circles – writing, remembering
about writing about remembering – circles
homing on the bull's eye's red. Cut
to me on a bike, deep in concentration
on the anticlockwise curve of the track
around the front lawn. I swerve,
raising the briefest of smiles to camera.
Dad hovers, waiting to step in
and deal with my gravel-rashed knees.
The reel's used up on a weekend visitor
backing her car down the drive.
White dots perforate the last few frames.
Then there's the slap of film spinning
freely on the take-up spool.

Precision

Let's be precise
about disease:
there is a cause.

Let's be precise
about symptoms:
they are elusive.

Let's be precise
about statistics:
they are invariably flawed.

Let's be precise
about fate:
it may not happen.

Let's be precise
about the law:
we can contest it.

Let's be precise
about medicine:
it is expensive.

Let's be precise
about insurance:
it is more lucrative still.

Let's be precise
about marketing:
it is a science.

Let's be precise
about science:
it wants to be an art.

Let's be precise
about uncertainty:
it is difficult to pin down.

Let's be precise
about choice:
it's usually a chore.

Let's be precise
about benefits:
they are a burden.

Let's be precise
about trust:
it is especially hard to predict.

Let's be precise
about predictions:
they have self-belief.

Let's be precise
about the public:
it is all of us.

Let's be precise
about undesirables:
they are not people, but adverse events.

Lets be precise
about necessary evil:
it is wishful thinking.

Let's be precise
about wishful thinking:
it is a natural default.

Let's be precise
about language:
it helps.

Commerce

This poem is happy
to take questions
so long as they are brief.
(It has another important
assignment, before lunch.)

You have to admire
its slick presentation –
power and point – every word
vanishing onscreen
like a perfectly soluble drug.

Come back next year
and you'll find it faster still,
more immaculately targeted
to your interests.
All questions redundant.

Assurance

This poem has its foot
in the door. It wants
your informed consent
to its plans
for a world without risk.

It has your best interests
at heart – is sensitive
to minority interests
(and has the statistics
to prove it).

With an actuary's handshake
and a counsellor's smile –
this poem confirms
your worst fear
that it means business.

Found in Translation

The ciné reel unspools
to show me aged nine, or ten,
scrambling over the Dorset cliffs
in search of fossils.

Already I had the amateur's expert eye
for every delicate white whorled trail
that led through the shale
to a calcified ammonite.

My gentle chiselling
tapped the innocent echo
of an apocalypse; an obliteration
disinterred; dust

to dust; ashes
to ashes. And if everything must crumble,
is there, then, a reason
to deny small marvels

to the curious: finders, keepers?
A reason to lock away
the inquisitive hammers
and wait, instead,

for a meteorite or missile
to bury its nose for sudden death
into the cliff-face?
Across the bay

a man I didn't know
was *professional*, dug
with more sophisticated tools
for richer pickings.

By the end of the day

a whole, frail skeleton
of an ichthyosaur
was revealed, written in the rock

and now translated from ciné reel
to disk. The image flickers
on a giant computer screen.
Nothing, it seems, has changed.

My humble ammonites
lie, nestled in tissue paper,
in a jewellery box
of my mother's.

As for the bigger prize, heaven knows
under what harsh glare
or through what depths or darkness
it still swims.

Tools of the Trade

to sift the fragile relics from the soil

- a mechanical claw

to clean the statue's limbs

- a chainsaw

to curb the traffic in cultural loot

- an open market

to safeguard our inheritance

- a willing negligence

to establish provenance

- the blindest of eyes

to list the offenders and cite the crimes

- a secret pardon

to recover the stolen goods

- a loophole

to foster cultural exchange

- the dollar

to ease the long, hard, homesick vigil

- an oilfield, or two

to redistribute the spoils of war

- a greed for more

to mend our broken hearts

- a law

Rules of Armed Combat

Whenever entering a military zone,
remember to turn off your mobile phone.

Choose your camouflage with due respect
for the local environment

and go for capacious pockets.
If deploying rockets

ensure that you steer them
away from any museum

where items of international significance
may be housed. If in doubt, reference

may be made to the most recent catalogue
or the campaign weblog.

If called upon to defuse a UXB,
first remove all treasures from the vicinity.

Heads may need to roll.
If so, ensure that you retain full control

of those which may prove valuable.
Which they shall.

Appendix C: "The Early Days of OCR" – an example of typographical experiment. OCR stands for optical character recognition, a means of converting scanned scripts into electronic texts.

The Early Days of OCR

I'd like to τελλ ψου αβουτ α writirig course Iran
for students of all aqes and agilities.
You know the sort of thuig: 9eneral ~ki//~; a *per5onal voicε*;
\$~stained and plished #aeces of worl< in a ch0sen 2enre

and e~periment with other forrn5 - all within 'an informdl 9roop'.
Those days I was careful in preparing n()tes:
hardon+s for everyone in the c/ass:
the relationsnip between writer and radar;

tact and and tiction, stricture - arid plot;
the post4eminist 8ngle;
how to handle mir~or characters, those with the walk-or parts;
how mauscripts should be sniffed to publishers.

It was pre††y hard 901~9.
The timid band of labradors were at leastwell read
but I could swear some of the otters hadn't eyenopened
a single piece of modern fiction in their liver.

Some were aiming for the bestse££er lifts, to get themselves
on daytona telev1510~ as a novafist snortlisted for the 1000ker Prtzl.
Some should clearly have tried an MΔ. Some junk enro((ed to get out of the house.
Some kept silence while 0thers went on and on~ntil they bored us to teQ!ª.

We touched on allsorts of neat ire writirig:
p*rs*n*I history/autobio%raphy, pottery, TV drono,
writirig for chUnder and, once, for li&ht relief,
a panty-political broadcast.

I tried to linit myself
to suggesting a few subtle tectirical cl-la-riges.
Even so, some students had a fairly lovv tolerarce
for crtiilicsm of any fort.

I think I was quite good at encouraging them to be b old, to stretch tar
the unusual image, touseall the se✓ses, 'shovv don't tell',
though it often ~imply lame clown
to a natter of sheer cl@rity and ekpression.

L♫king back, perhaps I relied too much on my own meagre kno~lego
of the sul:ject. {Sometimes i wonder If writers are real
Ly the best teacriers.} Certainly my efforts
amounted to a less than Quoherent Princess.

Perhaps we tried to cower too much: #oetry *AND* #Ro5e;
3eta#hor; diogluε; the pifffalls of radio dram♫ *****Ⓢ▶▶◀◀;
trainspo♫ing to another mediumpot...tingpottingposing
and, of c◻~r5e, when to sto♫

Appendix D: Example of poem/photograph combination in *Henderskelfe* (Heaton and Munden 1989), though NB: the poems and photographs in the book are on facing pages, within a landscape format similar to *Asterisk*.



Bleached nettles litter
the precinct; a wan tribute
to neglect, though hardly
your common or garden tip.
The feverish trespassers
flatter themselves to think
they tread a hallowed path

to immortality, invested
with raiments of pure light.
Poor fools. Masonic wit
corroborates the white lie
of the land. Expect no more
than the friable stone tip
of an idea; a colossal tease.

Appendix E: "The Monkey Songs" as printed in *Poetry Review* (Munden 1990a).

| THE GREEN ISSUE | |
|--|--|
| <p>PAUL MUNDEN <i>The Monkey Songs</i></p> <p>i (SEE NO EVIL)</p> <p>Tree columns bossed with fungi reach up to a cathedral canopy. A green, muted brilliance filters down. The gargoyle stare of the sloth — immune to death — misses nothing. My sight is not so steeled, nor am I alone; a congregation of frogs, lizards and snakes averts its gaze, then blinks. The multi-faceted vision is erased. * * *</p> <p>The more edible insects have learned to look like a log, a fraying, decaying leaf or something fantastically dangerous. Predators return the compliment, offering heartless flattery — a head-hunting spree with a sting in the tale: the spoils are your own clean-picked brains. * * *</p> <p>Those of us just foraging to survive back off from the kerfuffle rife in the scaffold but soon, everyone's humble cover is blown. Even the benevolent rain begins to plunder the soil and there's an acid taste to the water trickling through my blindfolding fingers.</p> | <p>THE GREEN ISSUE</p> <p>That I would rather my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth than ape the sweet numbskull nothings of those who strip the forest's assets and skedaddle; their fat-cat chat the talk of the town. * * *</p> <p>First the glib promise — cash in hand — then <i>slash and burn</i>; a quick-buck blockhead stubbornness whittling the reserves of choice timber to a bleached pulp, toxins bleeding into rivers . . .</p> <p>That one such punishing debt might out- last life itself is an improbable, unmentionable threat. * * *</p> <p>Try if you will to replace pure rainwater with a stream of invective. The most virulent anger runs dry.</p> <p>For my part, vowed to turn the other cheek, I crouch, speechless but still sentient, more subtle perceptions strangely enhanced, palms crossed as if a sacred wafer were passing my lips.</p> |
| <p>ii (HEAR NO EVIL)</p> <p>A rustle of beetles in the leaf-mulch, the crooning of birds and the double-bass slap of creepers jam, as one jitterbugging pal or another joins the skiffle, keen to extemporize his twelve-bar fate. At the high-point, the devout assembly breaks into applause, a secular commotion ringing true. * * *</p> <p>Ignore the insidious, provincial gossip corrupting opinion and forsake all useful rumour of change at your peril. Hang your lina harps up upon the trees and trust whatever ultra-sound you have a hunch may save you; a ghostly, inaudible scan of the future, each frail pulse tracing a hushed refrain. * * *</p> <p>The once friendly cacophony distorts. I muff my ears to the chainsaw's heavy metal riffs, the steady thrum of mechanical plant boring the forest floor, and conjure instead, how, overhead the die-hard soloist might still chant to a dwindling audience. His tremulous quavers drop like rain.</p> <p>iii (SPEAK NO EVIL)</p> <p>Do not mistake my silence for compliance. Forgive this dumb-show from which I hope you'll understand</p> | <p>THE GREEN ISSUE</p> <p>That one such punishing debt might out- last life itself is an improbable, unmentionable threat. * * *</p> <p>Try if you will to replace pure rainwater with a stream of invective. The most virulent anger runs dry.</p> <p>For my part, vowed to turn the other cheek, I crouch, speechless but still sentient, more subtle perceptions strangely enhanced, palms crossed as if a sacred wafer were passing my lips.</p> |